YOU
CAN BE AN
INFORMATION WRITER

DUNCAN LONG

You Can Be An Information Writer

Duncan Long

About the Author:

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The author was born in Smith Center, Kansas, in 1949, and now resides in eastern Kansas with his wife and two children. He earned a BA degree at Sterling College and an MA in music composition at Kansas State University. Long spent nine years teaching in public schools and has also worked as a rock musician, proprietor of a mail-order business, youth director, and mail carrier, among other things. Currently he spends most of his working schedule writing, editing, and researching. The author's hobbies include target shooting, gunsmithing, and watching old movies.

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TERRIFYING THREE: UZI, INGRAM AND INTRATEC WEAPONS FAMILIES

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INTRODUCTION

Many people want to be writers. Most never realize their dream or settle for writing for free in a local paper or an obscure newsletter. This is a shame because almost anyone who wants to become a published writer or even make a living as a writer can do so *if* they know a few tricks and are diligent in their efforts toward creating a writing career.

Of course, the *real* money is in writing best sellers. Advances for an established writer who's hit the best seller list can run into the millions of dollars and the public is prompt to purchase books — and sometimes poorly written tomes at that — from an established author.

But...

Becoming a best selling author is more luck than talent; for every best seller, there are literally thousands of *good* manuscripts in editors' "slush piles." The situation is so competitive that most major publishing houses won't accept a manuscript unless it's submitted by an agent. And agents won't look at a manuscript unless it's from a published author. The little guy who's starting has been virtually shut out of the market. Making your living by writing the "great American novel" can be about as easy as winning a state lottery: many work at it but few are chosen.

Hollywood TV shows and the movies portray writers earning tons of money while traveling the world after that successful first novel. In reality, that isn't how it is for the average writer. If you're interested in writing as a get-rich-quick scheme, you're better off sticking to investing in Florida's underwater real estate.

How bad are things in the writing business?

The average writer in the US makes somewhere around $10,000 per year. That's the average. The majority of authors undoubtedly earn far less than that given the huge million-dollar-plus advances people like Lawrence Sanders, Stephen King, or other successful writers pull to skew the average higher.

On the other hand, it isn't impossible to make a decent living in the writing business.

While many talented fiction writers are competing for the crumbs that large publishers dole out, the information writing market often has to make do with less than talented writers. (If you don't believe this, study a few press releases or the instruction manuals

from several large manufacturers. These are often so poorly written as to be unintelligible.) Information writers don't drive expensive cars and jet around the world researching that one important novel a publisher has given a blank check for. But they also don't go begging for work the way most would-be novelists do. Information writers can make a decent salary and — with the current information explosion occurring in both science and business — are in much greater demand than are fiction writers.

"Information writing" is a huge field. It is basically everything being written that is non-fiction. It covers articles written in newspapers and magazines, technical writing for manuals and science journals, and how-to books. Many information writers are "switch hitting" from one area to another in order to "pump" a living from several small sources of writing income. Almost anyone with a little sense, curiosity, and a modicum of writing skill can find an interesting topic and make money in the information writing arena.

How does one become an information writer?

In the past, a person could become a writer more or less by hit and miss. That certainly is how most writers whose non-fiction books and articles you'll find on the newsstand today got started. But the days of "stumbling" into the non-fiction writing field are numbered. More and more people are buying powerful word processors and ever greater numbers of potential-writers work from their homes.

Just because most of the "old timers" stumbled into the writing field and carved out niches for themselves,

doesn't mean *you* can. No editor is in the business these days to "give a beginner a break." Editors and writers are like mercenaries: they do their dirty jobs for cash. So you should plan on working hard and occasionally fighting if you wish to really make it as a writer.

That said, the rest of this book will deal with the *how-to* of what you'll need to get started in a writing career as an information writer: how to discover markets, how to hone your skills, and areas which you can branch into to obtain even more money. Since information writing can be done freelance or as a staff position, we'll also look at some of the pros and cons of both types of work.

• 1 •

Getting Started

As with most professions, getting started as an information writer is difficult. Doubly so for freelance writers having to begin on their own without the benefits of a company or in-house "old timer" who knows the ropes. Many writers have to learn things the hard way.

That said, the ideal process for becoming an information writer is to procure a college degree in journalism (perhaps with a secondary science or business degree) and land an information writing job with a large company.

Unfortunately, such assignments are rare, especially for those with little writing experience. Few employers are going to hire a green and untried writer when

there are seasoned writers vying for the same positions.

Chances are, you'll have to start small and climb your way up.

One good way to do this, and certainly the safest from a financial point of view, is to test your abilities by writing part-time while holding down full-time employment. This allows you to develop at your own pace and "polish your prose" without worrying about whether or not you'll have enough cash to put food on the table. It's troublesome enough to write without the added fear of starving to death. Part-time writing permits you to utilize the "tricks" outlined later in this book, gives you a chance to build a reputation for yourself and establish important contacts with editors and those in the area you're writing about, and also gives you an escape hatch in the form of your full-time job should you discover that you can't make a go of it in writing.

Of course, if you can write full-time, you'll establish yourself as a writer more quickly. There are fortunate souls who have outside income in the form of a disability check, a working spouse, or a generous estate. If you are this type of person, you can launch out and see how well you can do as a writer. If you're not one of these, you should be cautious and take your time.

And taking your time seems to be the way it's done in the writing business. Most of the "great" fiction writers don't really hit their stride until they reach their forties; most established non-fiction writers are

the same. And many of those writing the articles you see in print are pushing what is the retirement age in many other professions.

Why this is, is enigmatic. But it's likely due in part to the fact these writers had to hold full-time employment before they could earn enough writing to support themselves. Too, it seems that the human mind doesn't "wake up" to reality until about two or three decades of life have passed. Age helps give an author the ability to polish and judge his writing as well as gain real depth in how he perceives things and humanity.

Of course, this doesn't mean you should wait until you're forty to try your hand at writing. It takes a lot of practice to become good at anything — including writing. So even if you aren't selling articles, the process of simply writing can be very important in building your skills. The would-be writer must be patient and remember that the best is yet to come if he's only in his teens or twenties. If you get published before forty, that's great. If not, hang in there.

With a career hitting its stride at forty, you would think writers' careers would be like meteors briefly flickering and then vanishing. In fact, writers usually live to a ripe old age. In addition to the promise of a full life, the longevity of the average writer is a big plus in terms of money. While many workers learn they are being let out to pasture in their sixties (a strange occurrence given the greater life expectancies these days), the writer can smile at his peers spending their leisure at exciting games of shuffle board or adventuring at lawn care while he continues to interview people and uncover what's going on behind the scenes.

Writers can keep writing as long as they can remember who they are; they need never become "has beens" in their chosen field. Athletes may have to retire at 35, actors grow too wrinkled to land the part, laborers may become too laid up to drive a truck. But a writer keeps his mind intact and continues to develop until they're lowering his cold body into the ground. (Sometimes even then he continues to write, if he's been hiring a tribe of ghost writers and proof readers to augment his toil!)

On the flip side of things, writers discover that they can practically retire and work at the same time. Modern word processors/computers allow erecting an office almost anywhere — from a bedroom, to a motel room, to the back of an RV. Authors need not be anchored to any location and can often "vacation" while doing research or interviews for writing projects. A writer can have the best of retirement today and continue to bring in money as long as he remains coherent.

Another plus is that information writers are also less apt to "burn out" on the job than is the case in other occupations. The reason for this is simple. If an author grows bored with a subject, he can simply commence writing about another one. Friends of information writers are frequently puzzled by how easy it is to change from one subject to another. ("How can you write about economics?" I've been asked. "I thought you were a gun writer." As we'll see later, the "facts" and research behind writing are not the exacting part of wordsmithing. The trick is actually creating the article and arranging the facts, not in gaining the information or "expertise" of a field.)

The ability to quickly switch gears and write in different areas (for example, economics and the automotive market) often causes authors to be tempted to employ pen names. In truth, the use of a pen name is frequently a mistake.

One reason a pen name can be a mistake is that a few readers/fans will be interested in reading *anything* you write. These fans can boost the sales of books that you may produce and will help you acquire more assignments by writing to editors to say how much they always enjoy seeing you in print. There won't be a multitude of these folks, but there will be a smattering of them and they're worth their weight in gold. You don't attract fans if you've changed your "handle" from one area of your writing to the next.

There are occasions when you should utilize a pen name, however.

One is if you've been unfortunate enough to land a contract with a clause giving the publisher the right to see and purchase or reject your next book (or, more rarely, magazine) manuscript. In such a case, you can use a pen name and a little discretion and sell to a second publisher without getting into hot water.

But, if possible, avoid these contract clauses since they complicate securing additional writing projects. Most publishers will strike the clause or modify it to have the options within "x" number of years on two more books. Explain that you have a lot of ideas and manuscripts floating around and you want to give them the best or most suitable for their publishing house. They'll generally agree to strike this clause.

If the publisher won't strike the clause, you should still sign the contract. If you have to, you can always

exercise the ploy of sending them old manuscripts that other publishers thus far have rejected. Most writers have a number of such manuscripts squirreled away in a box or their desk. Dust one or two off and send them to the publisher if you simply must void the contract's clause. But don't do this unless you have to — the company with your contract may reject the "duds" along with everything else you write from then on. Treat your publishers with respect or you may learn you don't have any to treat.

A pen name can also rarely be of use if your tome might endanger your family (*How the Mob Controls Congress*, for example) or might cause embarrassment (*My Sex Change Operation*).

One final spot for a pen name is when you've got stuck with a moniker that doesn't help in the market. An author with the handle of "Martha Love" is going to have trouble selling articles to *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. But if she uses "Frank Stone" or some masculine, gung-ho name, she's halfway there. More than a few women write for "male" magazines and men write for women's magazines, thanks to pen names.

It's wise to operate with as few pen names as possible. Stick to one or two so you can build up a following of readers and point to past articles to potential publishers. There are times when a pen name is a good idea, but usually your own name is the best.

Being an information writer has decisive advantages to it. Non-fiction writing can enable you to pursue what's interesting to you at the moment. It's

like being able to work on a hobby full-time — and change to a new one when things become boring to you.

For example, if you get interested in a new computer gadget, if you're working at a "normal" occupation, you'll have to shell out hard cash to buy the gizmo. You can enjoy it only during your leisure time. As a writer, on the other hand, you can legitimately deduct the cost of the item from your taxes — or even coerce an editor to foot the bill if you're lucky — and then you get to test the gadget *while* you're working. And someone pays you to do this! It's like being able to be a kid again, playing around all day. And, if you wax tired of the subject, you can shift to something else. There are few occupations like this! (This is why many authors refer to any job other than writing as "honest labor.")

Too, you'll realize that you have god-like powers — at least in the eyes of some readers. Manufacturers will be interested in having you review their products or offer ideas about improving them, readers will value your opinions. Sometimes you'll have a chance to talk to or interview celebrities who you'd never meet in any profession outside of writing (except perhaps as a Hollywood star or CIA spy). Information writing can be pretty heady stuff.

Of course, writing has its down side, too. If you're freelancing, the lack of money and/or not knowing where or if the cash will be coming a year from now can be worrisome. Anxiety about starving or losing your home is not real conducive to a relaxed life style.

Information writing for a business is more secure economically, but it has the "downers" of other jobs: you have to punch a time clock, you must often travel in heavy traffic, and you are required to wear the "uniform" of the three-piece suit and/or dress suit. (This seems to be changing, however, with more and more businesses allowing their employees to engage in telecommuting.) Hopefully this trend will continue until information writers, whether toiling for one employer or freelance, will be able to enjoy working at home in an environment they have complete control over and pace themselves according to their own schedule.

Another shortcoming of being an information writer is that the work is physically punishing. Now you wouldn't think that. The "labor" consists of simply wiggling your fingers over a keyboard. But that's an oversimplification.

You sit in place for long stretches; muscles grow stiff and your posterior tends to fossilize. Then — if care isn't taken — the lack of physical exercise shows up as lumps of fat around major body organs and poor health. Don't kid yourself; writing can be dangerous to your health!

Fortunately, a modest exercise program, a lazy boy reclining chair, and a keyboard that fits onto the lap all seem to help avoid physical ailments.

Now let's take a look at the hardware and software you need to launch a writing career.

• 2 •

Setting Up Your Office

Those working for a company as an information writer may wish to simply skip to the next chapter. But some of the basic ideas in this chapter may be of use to writers working for just one company if they take home work or wish to "augment" their job with moonlighting projects.

For those readers who will be working freelance, the first concern is to take care not to waste money when "setting up shop." Always remember that any money you can avoid spending on office equipment is money you'll have for other things. Many people run out and spend themselves into a hole and then have trouble making enough money to pay the bills. And most of those bills were rung up getting into business!

Wouldn't it be ironic if you had to quit writing so you could get a job to pay for the equipment that was supposed to enable you to be free to write? Don't hamstring yourself with bills when starting. Put off the purchase of equipment you don't really need until you have the money to play around with.

One of the nice things about being a freelance information writer is that your office can be almost anywhere. A bedroom, the kitchen table, or an attic garret can be, and have been, converted into writers' offices. About the only consideration is that you can work without being disturbed too often (which may rule out the kitchen if you have a tribe of children or a spouse working at home with you). It's also essential that you can leave your pile of books and other reference materials in place without having to pick them up every time you take a break or stop for the day; this may also rule out some areas of the house if you're concerned about what visitors will think when they see piles of books and papers strewn all over.

Your working environment should be enjoyable to be in. It's hard enough to start writing most days without having to face an office that is improperly heated, seems gloomy, or is otherwise unpleasant to be in. Yes, a few writers have done well toiling in a gloomy corner of a furnace room or in a frosty cabin — but imagine how much greater their output might have been if they had had a nicely lit, warm office.

After you've located an affable spot for your office, you'll need to add some equipment to it. There's one essential piece of equipment anyone who's serious about writing these days *must* have: a word processor.

Now a few authors still peck things out on a typewriter. (At least they claim to when telling about it to the press. Cynics suggest this is to keep beginners from succeeding due to misleading information!) If you're an established writer that can afford to have someone else re-type your work (into a word processor) or can enjoy the luxury of writing a book every five or six years, then *you* can do without a word processor. Otherwise, you'll need one of these electronic marvels.

A word processor will enable you to increase your writing output by a huge margin over what you could do with a typewriter. There is no comparison between the two instruments. It's like the difference between writing with crayons or an electric typewriter. Not only is the word processor faster to use, the final product can be easily transformed after you're finished. Editing, re-writing, or duplication of manuscripts is quick and clean.

Suppose, for example, you discover more information that needs to be added to your text *after* you've nearly finished it. You'd be facing an extensive re-write if you've used a typewriter. (Or, at least, a sloppy end product with inserted pages.)

With the word processor, you just type in the new material where it should go. The pages are automatically re-numbered and everything fits perfectly. Even if you've already printed the manuscript, a second copy is no big deal with the word processor.

The computer-run printer does the work while you take a break; the word-processor acts like an in-house secretary. The word processor takes much of the drudgery out of writing.

In addition to making the final print-out easier, writing the original manuscript is also much faster with a word processor. Large blocks of material can be moved within the manuscript and material from other books or articles you've written can even be pulled from disc storage and "plugged" into the article you're working on (with some re-writing to avoid copyright conflicts).

Rewriting is quick with a word processor. Words can be deleted or added and extensively shuffled to better positions. With a typewriter, rewriting calls for re-typing the whole manuscript, often with new mistakes being added in the process. Too, the work of re-typing is so great, that it's always a temptation to "let it slide" rather than polishing your writing to the best you can do.

If all these pluses aren't enough to sell you, word processing also allows for the use of spelling and style checkers. These make it possible for you to send a high-quality manuscript to your editor. Often the copy you send after using a word processor is — in a sense — "pre-edited," making the job of your publisher easier *and* making you more apt to be hired for future projects because of that.

So what brand of word processor do you need? There are some "stand alone" word processors

that do nothing but word processing. But more and more, a micro computer (also known as "desk top" or "personal" computer) being run with a word processing program is seen in the hands of professional writers. This is because the micro computer can do a number of tasks that a stand-alone word processor can't and will generally have more memory than the word processor.

A micro computer can store and sort data (an important plus for many scientific writers). It can also run economic, scientific, or other programs which may be of great use for some writing projects. Often the data and tables created by these programs can be pulled from data storage and incorporated into the word processing program being run on the micro computer.

It's also possible to use special gadgets with a micro computer. You can add a modem to a micro to access information from the many data banks or bulletin boards to be found throughout the US. The utilization of these informational services can be expensive, but information obtained from them can be hard or impossible to find elsewhere.

Need illustrations for an article? If you have a computer, a scanner can be coupled to it to "lift" photos from magazines or other sources, rework them, and incorporate them into your projects (with the caveat that the material must be reworked enough to avoid copyright conflicts). A joystick or mouse can be coupled to a computer with the proper program to actually draw blueprints or other precise drawings for those needing such illustrations for articles. Video cameras can even be mated to a micro to create "instant" photos that can be manipulated or combined

with other pictures stored in the computer. Programs are even available to create comic strip layouts or other illustrations. The possibilities are almost limitless and can enable you to create very special illustrations for your articles.

Finally, work is being done to produce massive storage systems using CDs (Compact Discs — originally designed for stereo players). These are now available, but expensive. But each disc can contain 600 megabytes (600M) of information (the equivalent of 1,600 floppy discs). Thus whole sets of encyclopedias or other reference books can be stored on a single disc. These can then be accessed via the computer and entire texts, illustrations, or data lifted from the reference work and transferred into the article you're working on. Too, it's possible to scan through these CDs for obscure information. In the near future, this ability to process information will make it practical for a writer to have a vast library right in his office. The catch is that these are currently very expensive: $700 to $2,000 for the player and $100 to $400 per CD. But prices will probably soon drop if they catch on.

If you have a micro, you can jump into any or all of this; those with stand-alone word processors can't.

So, even if you're just starting, don't cripple yourself with anything other than a good micro computer if at all possible. If you don't have the money to buy one, then get a job digging ditches or waiting tables until you've collected the money to buy a quality computer and word processor program. This tool is *the* key into the writing field.

All right. So *which* computer is *the* computer you need?

Fortunately, there isn't any one. Any number of computers will work. But there is a type that seems to be overwhelmingly used in the writing/publishing business these days: it's the "PC/XT/AT-Compatible" computer. These micros use the organization first used on the IBM micro computers with the "PC," "AT," or "XT" logo. Since the introduction of the IBM micros, a number of "clones" built with the same "innards" and capable of running the same programs have been designed. These are now available from new computer manufacturers while older computer companies have adopted the IBM configuration. Adding to the number of "clones" are computers made from components; these are to be found from large mail-order companies as well as small computer stores that "build" their own computers by assembling them from parts purchased in bulk.

The other industrial biggie in the micro field is Apple Computers. Apple makes some dandy micros and has given huge numbers to public schools; but the writing/publishing and business communities seem to be "into" the IBM-type format. Consequently, you may lose a few jobs from time to time if a potential employer wants a disc of your manuscript to save re-typing your manuscript. (And don't kid yourself. More and more businesses and publishers are working from discs to save on their costs. The manuscript for this book, for example, will be traveling to the publisher in a disc format along with a "hard" paper copy.)

Because of this, the Apple format isn't the best for writing purposes. If you have an Apple, you could get

by; if you're starting from scratch, go with an IBM-compatible system.

IBM computers often cost more than their clones. So clones offer a quick way to save some cash up front. But are the clones as good?

The answer is that they often are... With one caution: some "IBM compatible" or "PC Compatible" systems are *not* compatible with all IBM format discs and programs. This was especially true of some of the early "PC" Radio Shack computers. So be sure to test the system you're interested in *before* you buy one. Otherwise you'll be facing a nightmare down the line if your software won't run on the computer.

All right. You've found an IBM-compatible with a low price tag. How do you know that competitively-priced clone won't wear out a month after you take it home?

Generally, if a computer component is going to fail, it will fail within the first few days it's in use. If you purchase a computer that's covered by a 30-day guarantee, you should be able to break it in and know whether or not the system is going to keep going or conk out. Too, most components are well made with many coming from a few major manufacturers (who make parts identical to those in more expensive machines). Shopping for a good price is pretty safe.

Among the best deals are systems built by small computer stores. (The computer I'm writing this on was assembled locally by "Alpha Computers" in Manhattan, KS. The store is run by two brothers who *really* know their business. The system works perfectly and has a number of "custom" features I wanted — and I didn't have to buy a "package" with expensive features I didn't need.)

Mail-order companies also often offer fantastic prices. At one time, purchasing computers from a mail-order company was a "no no." When the computer went on the blink, it was hard to find anyone to repair it since the stores selling computers only serviced their own hardware.

That's changed. For one thing, people are more mobile. Computer stores discovered that customers come and go. Too, many computer stores have jacked up the service charges on computers to the point that they're happy to see you come in with more work. These high prices have also created many independent serviceman who sell few computers while doing lots of repairs.

If you purchase a computer through the mail, you can get a good deal and still get it serviced when it finally starts to have problems. Two good sources are:

Inmac
2465 Augustine Dr.
PO Box 58031
Santa Clara, CA 95052-8031
(213) 852-0973

and

CompuAdd
12303 Technology Blvd.
Austin, TX 78727
(800) 627-1967
which also has stores across the US.

Most micro problems are with either the keyboard or disc drives. Having mechanical parts, they eventually wear out. But they'll keep going for some time and can often simply be replaced when you're having problems. (Always check on the costs of having a computer serviced. If you're having problems with a drive or keyboard, you'll usually end up having to replace the whole unit. You pay for a new unit *plus* labor costs. It's pretty simple to pull out the old part and plug in a new one. Therefore, consider simply buying a new part through a mail-order company rather than having the computer serviced if you suspect that a drive or keyboard is worn out.)

OK. You go to your nearest computer store and shop for prices until you've located an IBM or a compatible that runs on PC, XT, or AT formats.

But... Before you shell out your hard-earned dollars, a few thoughts and suggestions.

First, you should have an idea of what you're shopping for. Go to a library or magazine stand and get a couple of computer magazines and study them. Learn what's popular and available. Become familiar with what drives look like and get a feel for what everything does.

Once you've become familiar with what a computer is and does, you're ready to venture into a computer store and look around. Give yourself some time and don't make any commitments — you may find a better deal in another store or with a mail-order company. While you're in the store, notice whether or not the employees are interested in helping people with problems or in simply selling a computer. If they just sell and you'll be on your own after that, you might as

well order through the mail. All a local store has to offer is service; if they can't do that, shop elsewhere.

People selling computers often get enthused about the newest "hi-tech" gadgets available for computers. This is understandable since there are many innovative products coming into the computer market all the time. But a computer doesn't need too many bells and whistles to run a word processing program. Don't shop for hi-tech; shop for proven gear with low price tags. (In fact, you should always be sure to ask if the store has a used, traded in computer that might be suitable for your purposes. And don't be afraid to check out a second-hand computer being sold through the want ads. Often an older machine will be a bargain.)

Now, let's get to what you do and don't need.

Chances are, you'll not need an expensive color monitor for your writing projects; the only exception to this would be if you were creating complex graphics for articles — and then only if you also have a color printer. So you can save a couple of hundred dollars up front by purchasing a "monochrome" monitor rather than a color system.

A bit more can be saved if you'll only be writing on the computer and not producing a newsletter or graphics for articles; in such a case, you won't need a graphics card inside the computer. That can save a couple of hundred more dollars for you.

One place you shouldn't be tempted to save money is the monitor. Purchase as large a one as possible and

be sure it has a nice, sharp picture. A large monitor allows you to keep your face back away from it when it's running. This helps prevent "computer acne" caused by the static electricity charge that builds on the screen and seems to cause pimples on users' faces. (There's also some evidence that monitors create a voltage charge that *might* cause health problems. The jury is still out on this, but it doesn't hurt to play it safe by staying back from the monitor.)

If you must have your nose in the screen, try to purchase a static discharge screen. One good one that also cuts down on glare is available from Inmac for $34. Do-it-yourselfers can sometimes achieve nearly as good static reduction by gluing strips of aluminum foil around the borders of the screen (a solution that's considerably cheaper but isn't nearly as pretty).

How much memory your computer needs is another bugaboo you'll face when shopping for a computer. Basically, computer memory is measured in "bytes" which is roughly the length of an averaged sized word. The letter "K" is used to denote one thousand (and "M," one million). Thus, a computer with 125K will be able to store about 125,000 words in its memory. In practice, much of this room is needed for the program being run on the computer, so things get complicated quickly. The main thing is to keep track of the size of memories when shopping so you can compare prices accurately. Also, be sure to see how much memory is needed in order to run any programs you're interested in using.

During the dark ages of the 1970s, writers using micros thought they were on top of the world with 48K of memory (and many of the stand-alone word processors have only 64K at the most).

Now, "go to the max" is the rallying cry. With the MS-DOS system (which runs disc drives — more on drives later) the practical limit of memory is 640K. Special cards or other disc-operating systems boost the memory limit higher; but 640K seems to be a practical limit for most modern programs. If possible, get the full 640K and you'll be able to run most of the popular programs which you may be using for writing projects.

The computer's memory lasts only as long as the machine is on. Therefore, you need a system to store the information you're typing into a computer. Back when, tape systems and various other mediums were tried; most proved either too slow or too expensive. The floppy disc is the system that finally emerged and is now pretty much standard on most systems.

Floppy discs are far from perfect. The discs are easily damaged and care must be taken to keep them free from dust. Disc drives eventually wear out and can be damaged if you move your computer without putting cardboard inserts into the drives to keep their heads from whacking around.

But the discs have become standardized and most programs will come on such discs. If you're writing a lot of short articles, floppy discs are ideal. They'll store a lot of information and are easy to make back-up copies of.

The new 3 1/5 inch discs have recently been added to the computer market. These were originally designed for the small laptop portables but are now often seen in standard-sized micro computers as well. The 3 1/5 discs are handy and store more information than the larger 5¼ inch floppies; but the publishing industry seems to be settling on 5¼ inch discs. So if you have the option of choosing between the two sizes, you'd be wise to have the capability of putting your manuscripts on the larger discs if possible (or — better yet — have one 5¼ and one 3 1/5 inch drive so you can process both sizes of discs).

Don't be tempted to purchase just one disc drive unless you'll only be writing short articles and running few programs (in which case, you might be better off with a stand-alone word processor). In theory, you can get by with just one disc drive. But it's an aggravation since you have to shuffle discs when backing up material and copying a disc takes forever.

How about two disc drives then? In theory, yes. *But...*

The big "but" to this is that many of the newer programs need more space than you can get on one or even two floppy discs. Therefore, if at all possible, you'll want to get a "hard disc drive" for your computer system so you can run the more sophisticated word processing and other computer programs.

A hard drive also gives lots of storage space for manuscripts so you're not "doing the disc shuffle" all the time trying to locate information that you've stored. If you're going to be writing a series of similar articles, manuals, or books, a hard drive is a very worthwhile investment.

Like memory, hard drives have different storage capacities. A 40 Megabyte (40M) hard drive is a pretty decent size for most writers; if you're not writing a lot of books and don't have a need for large amounts of data storage, you could get by with a 20M drive.

Ten or so large books (depending on their sizes) can be stored on a 40M hard disc with room for a number of large programs as well. Frankly, you'd probably be wise to spend a bit of extra money and get at least a 40M drive. When you run out of room on a drive, it can be quite a problem, since you're often left high and dry in the middle of a program. A 40M hard drive isn't too expensive but won't be apt to run out of room — as may be the case with smaller hard drives. Provided you do your "house cleaning" chores and remove useless or outdated data on a 40M hard drive, it'll last a long time and give you plenty of room for your writing projects.

Like floppy discs, hard drives can "crash" and lose most of the information on them. This won't happen often; perhaps only once every year or two. But it can be very traumatic, especially if you've been lazy and not backed up information. Therefore, you must be able to back up information stored on the hard drive.

Which leads us to a backup system for hard drives. Since you'll most likely be sending in copies of floppy discs to editors from time to time, the floppy disc is the logical solution to the need of a back up system. A floppy disc can be left in the drive and, at the end of the working day, you can dump what you've been working on, onto the floppy before shutting off the computer. With this tactic, the most you'll lose with a hard drive failure is one day's worth of work. (If you're working close to a deadline, you may want to create a back up several times a day.)

There are also programs which will help you recover data on a hard drive if you should accidentally format it (another danger) or have it crash. The leader of these is to be found in IBM's "Tools Deluxe" kit of programs. When set up, the computer automatically runs a program called "Mirror" each time you switch the machine on. Then, if the hard drive crashes or is accidentally formatted, a second program can be run to recover most of the data.

Similar programs are available for recovering from a loss of data on a floppy disc. Probably the best floppy disc program is Peter Norton Computing's "Utilities Advanced," which can be used to "repair" floppy discs and even recover lost data from them. But the best and easiest way to retrieve information is to make a back-up of discs and hard drive so the failure of either won't be a disaster.

It should be noted that dust and static electricity can both damage disc drives or send a charge of electricity into a computer to scramble parts of its memory. Therefore, keep your computer area clean and — if you live in a really dusty area — cover the computer with a dust cloth or plastic bag when it isn't in use. If you're in a dry area where static electricity is a problem, adding a strip of aluminum foil to its body or the keyboard can give you a "grounding spot" to harmlessly discharge a spark. Spraying fabric softener or "cling free" detergent additives onto a carpet or chair that creates problems will also reduce static electricity damage.

Floppy discs will leave a residue of dust and iron oxide on disc drive heads over time. Consequently, you should use a head cleaner once in a while to keep the heads clean. Since most of these devices consist of an

abrasive pad that is inserted into a drive like a disc, they can cause excessive wear on a head if overused. So limit the frequency of their use to just a few times a year to avoid damaging your drive. Another good idea for preventing damage when working with a hard drive is to "park" the drive when the computer is turned off. Several drive park programs are available to do this. Get one.

Parking the hard drive and protecting disc drives is especially important if you're purchasing a "laptop" computer. These machines are easily damaged if you start moving them around without proper precautions.

Laptops (and especially the smaller "notebook" and "palmtop" computers) have other shortcomings. One is that their screens are often limited in the angles they can be placed into. Some screens are hard to use in bright or very dim light as well. You'd do well to inspect one of these computers before buying.

The keyboards on most laptops and tablets are pretty limited due to their sizes. And the palmtops are designed for use by little green men. But the machines can be carried virtually anywhere when you travel.

The biggest concerns with laptops are their expense and limited memory capacity. However, most can be expanded to allow for easy use in word processing. A hard drive is an important plus with one of these (and essential for running word processing programs like WordPerfect — more about this program in a moment). A good, heavily padded carrying bag is another

must along with a good battery recharger/adapter for a laptop.

All in all, laptops are a bit of a compromise when it comes to screen quality, storage capacity, and the practicality of the keyboard. But they enable many information authors to write articles while they are traveling, often earning money and "writing off" their trip as a money-making, writing project. From that standpoint, a laptop can be hard to beat and such a machine coupled with a small printer enables some writers to set up their office wherever they feel like it, indoors or out.

If you opt for a standard micro, the keyboard you purchase will make a big difference in how well you can operate it. A keyboard is a very personal thing. The best bet is to go to a store and try several. Light key touches can speed things up, *but* be sure a keyboard's touch isn't so effortless that you're accidentally hitting keys all the time. If you're ordering through the mail, you have to take pot luck on the "feel" of the keyboard. In general, you'll want a "tactile touch" keyboard that "snaps" when the key stroke is being made. (Because of the difficulties of buying a keyboard that feels right, this is one component that you may wish to purchase locally.)

It should be noted that there are several potential damage points with keyboards. One is the Pepsi syndrome: liquids spilled into its electronics. Any liquid with sugar in it will damage a keyboard; the carbon in sugar shorts out electrical components.

The second point where a keyboard will wear out is at any cord that may connect it to the computer. When this starts to fail, your keyboard will seem to "lock up" with the keys no longer controlling the computer. The quick fix for such problems is to simply replace the cord. If you have any electrical skills, it's usually possible to pop open the keyboard and put the new cord in yourself. (It may require some soldering. Don't tackle it unless you're familiar with soldering electrical components.)

Sometimes an individual key will malfunction due to a bit of dust trapped in its contact. This can often be cured by popping off the key (just pull straight up on an individual key and it should come right off). Use compressed air to blow out the dirt. (Compressed "canned air" is often available in electrical and computer stores.)

When you shop for keyboards, you'll learn that there are several formats. The newer styles are the "101-Key Enhanced" keyboards. (Having lived with both keyboards, I can tell you quite frankly that the 101-key layout isn't too swift to use. The reason for this is that the function keys are, for some obscure reason, lined up out of reach across the top of the unit with a blank space between the number keys and the extra keys. Additionally, the numeric pad is separated from the arrow keys rather than being coupled to them. This all makes the keyboards *very* awkward to use.)

A better bet is the older style 84-key or "5060" keyboard originally created for the PC/XT computers. This keyboard has a numeric pad that can be switched to arrow keys, making it easier to reach and use with many word processing programs. Additionally, the function keys are located in a group to the left of the

standard keys making them simple to use with the left hand. In short, the 84-key keyboard is much, much quicker and easier to type on than are the "new, improved" styles. (As one writer put it, the 84-key layout is the way God meant for keyboards to be.)

In order to get an 84-key layout, you'll generally have to opt for a computer with a separate keyboard. That's great since it allows you to lay the keyboard on your lap and sit in an easy chair rather than being in an uncomfortable typing chair all day!

Which brings us to chairs.

Back in the dark ages when typewriters were mechanical monstrosities that had to sit on tables, it was sensible for secretaries, writers, and others dependent on the crude devices to sit upright like little soldiers. But that's no longer necessary.

In fact, you can type faster, more accurately, and for longer periods, if you can recline slightly in a comfortable chair rather than being forced to sit upright in the old-fashioned secretary's chair. Therefore, do yourself a favor and purchase a computer with a removable keyboard that will free you from the drudgery of sitting upright at a desk like someone in the dark ages.

OK. Now which chair?

My advice is forget all office chairs. Even if you could find a comfortable one that reclines, it would be quite expensive. Instead, go to a furniture store and test their recliners. Pick one that's comfortable, with arm rests about even with the top of your thighs. This will allow you to rest your elbows on the arm rests and have the keyboard on your lap. This allows you to type while comfortably leaning back. For even better comfort, use the foot rest to keep your feet up — and

the blood flowing to your brain will undoubtedly help your thinking, right?

A vinyl-covered chair is easy to care for, especially if you like to munch and eat (just keep the crumbs off the computer keyboard). Dark colors will show fewer stains than light colors — a consideration since you'll be spending several hours every day in your chair.

Buy your chair first, and then work toward getting your computer set up. You should have your computer's monitor so its face is at right angles to any windows or bright light sources. This will reduce glare and eyestrain caused by reflections.

(Also adjust the brightness of the monitor as you use it so it's suitable for the lighting conditions which can change greatly during the course of a day. Having the brightness too high is like looking into a light bulb. It won't injure your eyes, but does cause eye strain and makes it hard to read off printed reference books and magazines if you're using any. Also, be sure to look at objects some distance away from time to time; otherwise, you may one day find out that you're becoming nearsighted. Eye muscles need to be exercised by looking at distant objects.)

Once you've got your chair, you're pretty well set up in the furniture department. Get some sort of desk that will put your monitor at eye level (when you're reclining in your stuffed chair). The height of the desk is more important than how it looks. And be sure there's room for your legs and feet when you're reclining in front of the computer monitor. Again, don't be tempted to purchase expensive office equipment designed for computers. Purchase a secondhand desk if possible or check out your local K-Mart or WalMart for an inexpensive fiberboard desk.

Unfortunately, monitors are still designed with the secretary-forced-to-sit-in-an-upright-chair mind-set. Therefore, you'll probably need to tilt it downward to face you when you're relaxed in your recliner chair. A few monitors are designed to tilt downward. If yours is, great. If not, simply get a small cardboard box, a chunk of styrofoam, or similar material, and prop the monitor at the proper angle. Again, don't be tempted to spend a chunk of money on an expensive swivel stand. The box or styrofoam works well and is considerably cheaper.

You'll often also discover that you need to consult reference material and have nowhere handy to place it. Or, if you've managed to balance it on the arm of your chair, it flops closed, making it impossible to type *and* keep the book open (unless you're one of those lucky folks blessed with four arms). In such a case, what you need is known as a "copyholder."

Again, shop for price. Copyholders designed for business use can cost a pretty penny. If you like to "shop" garage sales, you might be able to locate an old music stand and use metal paper clips to create a make-do copyholder for holding papers, magazines, or even large reference books that you may need to consult.

If you can't locate a make-do copyholder, most mail-order computer vendors have such equipment. Inmac sells an excellent "Suspension Convertible" for $50 which has a long arm that swivels to position your work at the correct angle and height. Their "Office

Caddy" is also ideal if you have a desk close to your chair; cost is $45.

(The option I settled on is an old microphone stand left over from my rock music days. A clipboard is secured to it. An old metal book stand salvaged from a library book sale is glued to the clipboard so I can rest papers or magazines on it without having to clip them into place. The clip on the clipboard is useful for holding stubborn books open. This contraption has been better than the high-cost gadgets offered to do the same job.)

In addition to your computer/keyboard/monitor assembly, desk, and chair, another piece of hardware you'll need is a computer printer. These are necessary to create any correspondence or manuscripts you'll be sending. And while you *hear* talk about a "paperless office," it isn't here yet by a long shot. You'll need a printer.

There are three basic types of printers. The laser printer is the best — and way too expensive for most writers. Unless you'll be producing a newsletter, making camera-ready copies of computer-generated artwork, or engaging in "typesetting" projects, save your money and avoid the laser printer.

The other two types of printers are the dot-matrix and the daisy wheel printer. Both are in price ranges making them affordable for most writers.

Dot matrix printers are considerably faster than daisy wheel printers. But their print quality is not quite as good as a daisy wheel's. And, unfortunately, many

editors still insist on high-quality print when they do editing — plan on getting a daisy wheel printer if you can purchase only one printer.

If you can *not* afford the extra money for a daisy wheel printer, you can get by with a dot matrix printer. But you'll be handicapped up front, since some editors will simply return your manuscript without bothering to look at it. It's a better bet to spend the extra money on a daisy wheel printer.

(After you're earning some cash and have money to burn, then you can then purchase a dot matrix printer to add to your set up. This will enable you to quickly produce rough drafts, letters, or other print outs where it isn't essential to have sharp print, on the dot matrix, and then use the slower daisy wheel for the persnickety editors you'll have to deal with from time to time.)

Brother, Epson, Panasonic, and other companies offer excellent printers. The best bet is to shop for prices with these printers. The printer should have the capability to handle single sheets, envelopes, and should have a tractor drive so fan-fold paper can be fed into it for long manuscripts. (Micro-perf paper is best for this since it can be easily torn apart for collating the manuscript. Furthermore, the edges are "smooth" with the micro-perf paper.)

An old typewriter stand or desk can be used to hold your computer printer. Again, this need not be expensive; if you must buy a new one, check WalMart or some other discount store. All you need is something to hold your printer off the floor. Don't be tempted to spend money needlessly for an expensive steel and plastic unit that looks like a leftover from the latest sci-fi picture.

If possible, do *not* use the same table for both your computer and printer. If the drives of the computer run while the printer is chugging away, it might put a little extra wear and tear on them due to the vibrations created in printing.

Once your computer hardware and "furniture peripherals" are covered, you need software to run the computer. There are any number of good word processor programs available, but one seems to be growing very popular with publishers and many business users. It's WordPerfect. And it's well on the way toward becoming an industrial standard in both the business and publishing communities.

Consequently, you'd do well to start with WordPerfect and not fool with learning another less expensive program; once you've mastered it, you'll have a skill that might land you a job as a full-time information writer with a large company. Too, the ability to send a completed article or manuscript to a business or publisher in a disc format they can easily use can be a big plus. (In fact, writers are discovering that they sometimes land a job simply because they use WordPerfect, since it means that editors can do their work from a computer using the disc sent in by the writer. There's no lag or expense, because the article doesn't have to be retyped.)

WordPerfect has been updated several times since it was introduced. The newest update at the time of this writing is "5.1." The 5.1 has graphic capabilities, however; consequently many writers use the older 4.2 version in the interest of not having to fool with the extra commands and characters they'll not be using. If you've avoided purchasing a graphics card for your monitor and won't be doing any work on newsletters,

charts, or the like, then you can get by with the 4.2 and save some money. (There are also versions of WordPerfect for other common computers like the Apple, Commodore, etc., if you have something other than an IBM or an IBM clone.)

If you'll be doing graphics work on a computer, or would simply like to have the extra skills for future employment, then it makes sense to get the 5.1 version (and, perhaps, the company's DrawPerfect for making charts) and learn to use it. Being able to handle graphics with your word processing program can be an asset. This enables you to learn the various skills involved more quickly, since many of the same commands will work both word processing and graphics features. (This can be a *big* plus, since it keeps you from having to keep track of two different sets of programing commands, as is the case when one program handles the word processing and another, the artwork.)

Being able to work with the 5.1 would enable you to create "in house" newsletters, ad layouts, and brochures, or even produce camera-ready pages for books and magazines. (That would look really nice on a resume, wouldn't it?)

Both versions of WordPerfect also have several excellent sub-programs that you'll find useful and which will improve your writing quality. One of these is the spelling checker. This can be used in several modes. The most practical is the document checker which will go through your manuscript and stop at any word not found in its dictionary (which is quite large). At that point you can select the correct spelling from a group of words it "thinks" you aimed to use or you can simply retype the word correctly.

When the program stops at a word that's correct but not in the WordPerfect dictionary, you can add it to a temporary or permanent list of words. If the word is added to the temporary list, then it won't be "flagged" anymore during the current spelling check. The program will just skip it, like other correctly spelled words. If the word is added to the permanent list, then it's treated as a correctly-spelled word in the current document and any future ones you'll check.

The spelling check program can also be used to count the number of words in a document (a useful feature for magazine articles or to see how much you'll be paid on a per-word basis). The word counter can be utilized alone or in conjunction with the speller with the number of words given after the spelling has been checked.

The spelling checker can also be used to check individual words or pages. The first is useful if you have a word that bothers you too much to wait until the end of the document before you check it. (This is "vanity checking" and actually wastes time, since it's quicker to check all the words at once. But most of us can't help ourselves and check such words anyway.)

The page check option in the spell check program is useful if you have to add information to an article after it's already been checked once. Then you can just check the page that has been modified rather than an entire article.

Another useful program that comes with WordPerfect is its electronic thesaurus. This allows you to find several optional words for often-used or trite words. If not overused, the thesaurus can really spice things up and keep an article interesting. (Just don't be tempted to use words which you're not familiar

with or which don't quite fit. It's better to have the right word too often than a wrong word once.)

The spell check and thesaurus can both be used from "inside" the actual word processing program. You don't have to "exit" WordPerfect to use either of these features.

WordPerfect has too many features to cover in one chapter of a book. Suffice to say, it can do block moves, search documents for words, rename and delete files, and control one or more printers (including allowing you to "type thru" so the printer will perform like a typewriter with your computer keyboard — handy if you need to fill out a document or form).

WordPerfect is also capable of "switching" between two documents so you can do block transfers of information from one text to another. This is *very* useful if you discover you need to borrow information from another source such as an old article you've written, data you've collected, or someone else's material gleaned from a BBS (Bulletin Board Service). It can also be a work-saver if you discover that you need to transfer information from one chapter of a book to another or some such thing. Then you can move "stuff" from one chapter to the other without getting the two mixed up when it comes time to save the revamped versions; it's even possible to use a window feature with WordPerfect so both are on the screen at once.

WordPerfect also has a "shell" feature which allows you to keep the program and any written information you're working on in the computer's memory while you leave the program and run another computer program. This makes it possible to do complex operations like run a modem or other program and then im-

mediately re-enter WordPerfect right where you left off. It's possible to work with non-WordPerfect computer files from inside the word processing program; this allows deleting, renaming, searching for files, or copying them from inside the word processing program (which is often much easier than operating directly from the DOS mode).

WordPerfect is very user friendly and nearly failure proof. An extensive "help" program tells you what each of the various special commands are and can even help you locate the keys needed for a specific command as well as outline what a group of keys will do; this makes it possible to work without continuously consulting the owner's manual when you're first starting. It's also possible to print a document from a WordPerfect file while you continue to type on another one. The program automatically shuffles data to the printer without making you stop your work.

And if there is a program failure due to a glitch on a disc or some such thing, WordPerfect will generally recover from the problem so all your work isn't lost. Many other word-processing programs aren't this kind and you can find yourself dumped out of the program with the article you've been slaving over lost in the process!

Another plus is that WordPerfect doesn't erase the old copy of a document until after the new version is saved. This means if the power drops off in the middle of an updating of an article (don't laugh, it's happened to me) the old version of the article will remain on the disc to be recovered. Provided you update your work every so often, this keeps a power failure an irritation rather than a total disaster.

Enough said. As you can see, I'm sold. My advice is to get a version of WordPerfect and forget the rest of the word processor programs. (You can purchase a copy of this program from almost any computer store or company. One mail-order source is CompuAdd which sells it for $300.)

One very useful accessory for WordPerfect is the set of heavy plastic "overlays" (kind of like a super heavy decal) that can be stuck right onto each special key of a computer's keyboard. These overlays are color-coded and do away with the keyboard templates normally used with WordPerfect. They make a neater-looking keyboard that's faster to use when you need to locate a function key by sight. The cost is $15 for a set of the sticky-backed overlays for either the 5.1 or 4.2 versions of WordPerfect. (Chances are, later versions of WordPerfect will have similarly-priced overlays as the program is updated.) There are also keyboard overlay templates for foreign languages for those working on foreign-language projects. The overlays and templates are available from:

Data-Cal Corporation
3401 E. Broadway Rd.
Phoenix, AZ 85040
(602) 243-1234.

A new type of computer program that you should also consider purchasing is a style checker. Currently, none of these is quite perfected. But several are fairly good and can be a great help in improving your writing.

A style checker is basically an electronic editor that goes through your article or book chapter and flags anything that might be incorrect. They can be very good or really dumb.

Suppose you wrote the following:

> "Their are to ways to accomplish this very simple problem. To really do it quickly, it's wise not to act like a complete boob. Rather..."

Now, after running this through a style checker (in this case "RightWriter") you'll have something like this:

> "Their are [*—**G9. IS Their are BEING USED CORRECTLY?** *] to ways to accomplish this very simple problem. [*—**G3. SPLIT INTO 2 SENTENCES?** *] To really do [*—**S2. SPLIT INFINITIVE: To really do** *] it quickly [*—**U22.USER FLAGGED WORD: quickly** *], it's wise not to act like a complete boob [*—**U1. COLLOQUIAL: boob** *]. Rather...."

As you can see, a style checker does a good job of spotting words used incorrectly like a "their" where you should have used "there." But notice the "Their are to..." That "to" should be "two;" sometimes such errors will slip through a style checker.

On the other hand, the split infinitive is hard for many writers (present company included) to catch. And most style checkers are really good at spotting these sorts of errors.

Since I often overuse a small group of words — one of which is "quickly" — I've added that to a "personal" flagging section of the style checker. This helps me

replace my own set of trite words; most style checkers will add other words to this group as well.

Some phrases or words may be offensive to some readers. For example, "boob" has some not-so-polite meanings and is better avoided if you're not to offend some readers. This is therefore flagged by the style checker so I'll be aware of it. Since most of us inadvertently use a few words that may be offensive to potential readers, it's good to at least be aware of the landmine you've planted in an article. Regardless of the suggestions given by a style checker, you don't have to change anything. But it's good to be aware of what might be wrong rather than stumbling blindly, repeating errors and perhaps offending readers or editors in the process.

Many style-checking programs also keep track of how often various words are used in an article. This can be very useful since most people — writers included — tend to latch onto a word and repeat it over and over. This goes unnoticed in everyday speech, is irritating in newscasts, and is aggravating in written material for some reason. Fortunately, the English language is rich with words; once you're aware of overuse, you can get it cleaned up quickly with a word processor.

Here's the way it's done: the style checker shows how many times each word was used; you pick the words that were overdone; then you employ the search option of your word processor to locate each spot where the word was utilized; then the word is exchanged for a different one (perhaps exploiting the electronic thesaurus to find the best substitute). The process is quick and can really improve a manuscript.

The shortcoming of style checkers is that they just can't catch everything and often come up with really weird suggestions due to the many odd ways that English can be correctly used in one spot while the same pattern would be terribly incorrect in another.

My pick of the style checkers (with the understanding that it still has occasional glitches and isn't perfect as far as I'm concerned) is "RightWriter." Another good style checker that many writers like is "Grammatik III." Either can be purchased from CompuAdd for around $50. But be prepared to endure strange comments on occasion.

Whatever equipment and programs you end up with, be sure that all letters and documents you send out look as good as you can get them. Potential employers and publishers will assume that they're seeing your best work when you send a letter to them. If it's sloppy, you'll be making a poor first impression and will likely lose any chance you might have had of gaining a project.

So always appear professional. Letters should use a standard business format (copy one off some of the junk mail in your mail box if you have any doubts).

As to manuscripts, they must be double-spaced with extra room at the head of every first page, chapter, or whatever. New chapters should start on a new page and each page should be numbered and have your name, article title (if you've submitted more than one title), or some other ID in case the editor drops everything on the floor (it happens too often to be

funny). Margins should be wide enough to allow editing changes along the edges of the page.

Always use your word processor's spelling checker and don't be afraid to "listen" to a style checker and utilize your electronic thesaurus. If possible, have a friend, spouse (hopefully also your friend), or business acquaintance check important documents. Use quality paper and a new ribbon for your final, to-the-editor draft.

Finding a good — and inexpensive — source of printer ribbons, micro-perf paper, envelopes, and other office supplies can be a problem. One good mail-order source is:

Viking Office Products
2120 Valley View Lane
PO Box 819064
Dallas, TX 75381-9064
(800) 421-1222.

Viking will even let you set up a charge account (once they get to know you) so you can simply call their toll-free number and place your order. Viking gets whatever you need to you quite quickly without your having to leave your home.

Some writers will need additional hardware. If you're interested in writing magazine articles, a camera is usually a must. Often editors won't buy a

really well-written article if it doesn't have good photos with it; conversely, an editor will sometimes buy very poorly-written articles if they also have good photos. No one likes to admit it, but many magazines are more concerned about their pictures than they are with the quality of their articles. The horrible truth is that pictures sell magazines on the newsstand. Rather than wring your hands and sob about the poor literary quality of today's magazines, it's better for your pocketbook to learn to take pictures to illustrate your articles or books.

Now what camera do you need?

There are umpteen varieties to choose from. But the 35mm camera is the one most commonly used for magazine and book photos. It's ideal for both color and black and white photos.

You need a camera that can get sharp pictures. That means a quality camera such as a Minolta or Olympus. And get a good lens for it; a 50mm lens will handle most of your photography needs. Don't waste money on a telephoto or portrait lens unless you *really* need them.

If you need a "long lens," the "zoom" is the best bet. While not quite as sharp as the fixed lens, and also a bit more expensive, the zoom lens is much more flexible and will give you a wider range of options. (Many photographers find the 75-250mm lens is a good compromise for magazine work.)

Generally, you'll take better photos by getting as close as is possible to your subject. Taking photos of subjects in the shade or with the sun toward your back will often prevent harsh contrasts of light and shadows.

Use of "400" film will enable you to take most of your photos outdoors in the shade without the need of a flash; "400" or "1000" film will get you by with many indoor photos. (Once you get the hang of things, you may wish to purchase a flash — but don't rush out and get one until you're certain you really need it.)

There are many features that can be useful with a camera. If possible, you should get a camera that will show light exposures and the actual focus of the lens through the viewfinder. Automatic light-level adjustment is a good feature *if* you can override it when you're photographing a dark object in the center of a light background.

Photos do not have to be large. Many publishers will be happy to use the standard-sized 4x5-inch prints *provided* the contrast between lightness and darkness is good and the features very sharp. If the main object is a little blurry, forget it. (The background can be blurry and, in fact, is often better if blurred since it won't distract from the foreground.)

When starting, try Kodak's "Tri-X" for black and white photos and the company's "Kodachrome" or "Ektachrome" for color slides (which can be used for color magazine photos). Once you've got your feet wet, you'll likely decide to try other types of film and will undoubtedly find some that give you better results. But when you're starting, use these films since they'll most often give you results that will be good enough if you've taken care to get everything into focus and centered.

Focus is the most important feature of a good photo. If you wear glasses, be sure you have them on when you're photographing; Mr. Magoo never produced any photos worthy of publication. Also be aware of what's

behind your subject. Photos often don't show the actual depth of field; consequently, branches in the background can become antlers on top of your subject's head; an object can be lost in a confusing mess of background brush if you're not careful. Such situations are funny — unless your salary goes down the drain because you didn't get any other photos to illustrate your article. Then such an error can be quite frustrating and expensive to boot.

Always take more photos than you think you'll need. Vary the exposure, focal lengths, and backgrounds. This way, if some of the photos don't turn out, chances are others will. Too, if you have extra photos they may be useful for future related articles (always take care to store photos in an orderly manner so you can locate them later).

Much time and money can be spent in learning to develop your own photos. When starting, send the photos to commercial, mass-production developers. The quality will generally be as good or better than what most amateurs can achieve and will save you a wealth of time and money in getting set up with equipment, paper, and developing chemicals.

It should also be noted that many manufacturers will supply photos of their products, if you'll be writing favorably about them. These photos are usually of very high quality and can save you time and money. Just be sure to give the company photo credits ("photo courtesy of Brand X Company") and don't use a photo if you're going to "slam dunk" the product, reveal that it isn't too whippy, or some such thing. (If you do use a company-supplied photo and knock the product, the manufacturer may give you some legal harassment, or

even bring a suit against you. Take your own photos if you're into exposes.)

Whether you're knocking a product or praising it, it's wise to cover your backside by always getting written permission from a company to use its photos. While, theoretically, a company that sends its photos to you has given you permission to use them, it doesn't hurt to have a written document to back you up if an editor wants to know about it or if a company decides they don't want you to use the photo — after its gone to the printer.

Also be sure to get written permission to use photos of individuals in your articles. While it would seem like most people would be happy to have their face appear in a magazine, a few decide they should have been paid or get mad when they appear in a magazine they don't approve of (say a pacifist in a military magazine or a minister in a girlie publication). In some cases, things can get ugly quickly — unless you've got your subject's signature on the dotted line saying it is fine for you to use the photo you took in the magazine article you're working on.

Most people are more than happy to sign "on the spot." Just be casual about getting a signature and don't give them too much time to think about it or they are apt to decide you "owe them" — even though you don't.

Sooner or later you may wish to add a phone to your office if you don't already have one close by. If you need a phone, locate an inexpensive model in a discount store and purchase it. Don't be tempted to waste your money on an expensive, gadgety model. Since you'll likely be around the office most of the time, you'll

probably not need an answering machine unless you hit the bestseller list.

Fax machines are the rage now, but it seems doubtful that these are of use to most writers. If you're really concerned that some day you'll be pressed for time and will have an editor with a fax machine waiting for your article to come in, it's possible to get a "Fax Board" to plug into your computer. This allows you to use it as a fax machine to send or receive fax info. It costs only about half as much as a regular fax machine and the data you receive can be used by your word processing or other programs. Currently CompuAdd offers a 4800 baud "J.T.Fax" board for IBM-compatibles for just $310.

An even cheaper solution is to use CompuServe's fax service. With this setup, you can compose your message, call your CompuServe number via a modem, get to the proper area in the CompuServe network, and dump your message. CompuServe then transfers it to their fax and relays it to your editor or whoever. Cost is quite inexpensive for a short message and it makes more sense to "fax" this way than to purchase an expensive fax machine you'll need only once in a great while. (More on CompuServe and modems elsewhere in this book.)

At the time of this writing, several companies are working on computer peripherals that will recognize a wide range of spoken words and translate them into computer characters, commands, and words. Should these ever become available in a form that is fairly accurate, they will *greatly* reduce the time needed to

"write," since it's possible to dictate much faster than it is to type.

So you should keep your eyes open for such a gadget. But don't rush out to buy the first ones that appear. Computer hardware prices have always come down. Being the first to own a gadget is expensive and the "cheaper" versions often work better than the originals. Let the rich guys go first and spend your money on the better, less expensive models that will follow a year or so later.

Whether you're buying a fax machine or a used computer, be sure to put your money where it will help you earn more money through your information writing projects. Don't worry about the color of the carpet in your office or if the recliner you work from is about worn out.

Strive instead to secure a quality computer, a word processing program, and a good printer. Then go for low expenses and comfort. Save your cash for what you *really* need.

(Whenever you do spend money, keep the receipts. You can save more money by taking all your legitimate operating costs as business deductions on your state and federal income tax.)

Remember: the goal of working as a writer is to bring money in, not to see how much you can spend. The less you spend, the less you need to make. Keep that in mind, and you're half way there.

• 3 •

Finding Work

Work, like gold, is where you find it. And to locate it, you often have to search diligently.

Many of the methods of attaining work as outlined in this chapter can also be employed to land a nine-to-five job as well as smaller writing tasks. And small projects, combined with other small assignments, can create enough income to support a freelancer.

Before jumping into a full-time job, it's wise to look at the pros and cons of working at home. The most obvious shortcoming of working at home is the

lack of a fixed income. You have to "hustle" all the time, trying to collect new assignments, meet deadlines, and maintain contacts with any number of old or potential employers. This gets quite complicated and hectic. If you don't want to worry about obtaining new writing jobs all the time, juggling bills, and plotting where you're headed from one day to the next, an eight-to-five job at some business needing an information or technical writer is probably for you.

Some people also have trouble disciplining themselves to work at home. Or they hate trying to work from home because their spouse and/or kids are always under foot. Or perhaps they miss the camaraderie between office workers. In any case, these people, too, should try to land a full-time job with a large company.

The "loner" or person who enjoys working by himself will relish freelancing. There's a bit of distance between the freelancer and his employers; the freelancer will seldom actually face his "bosses" but will deal with them over the phone or via letters. Consequently, for those who hate face-to-face dealings or needless conversation (which can waste a whole lot of time), freelancing can actually be less stressful than plodding along at a secure job with the inherent confusion and office politics that businesses seem to generate.

The lack of face-to-face contact also means that a freelancer can "dress up" in a sweat suit rather than a three-piece suit and tie, forego shaving or makeup, and wear a hair style to suit the individual's whims and tastes. Few nine-to-fivers enjoy such freedom.

A freelance information writer can also choose to quit working with anyone he finds disagreeable with a minimum of fuss. Where quitting a full-time position is

pretty traumatic and may mean a major move or some such thing, dropping one freelance contact is no big deal. This can be of substantial worth, especially for those who find "high pressure" businessmen revolting.

Freelancers can also devote more of their efforts to actually working, rather than sitting in a traffic snarl when commuting to and from work. While many people don't think about it, just a 30-minute commute to work amounts to an extra hour of stress and lost time per day. That's nearly a full day's worth of time by the end of a week. A freelancer can use this time to do something he enjoys at home or — more likely — to do productive work.

Nine-to-fivers can install a cellular phone, tape machine, and whatnot to try to utilize some of their commuting time productively. But they'll never be able to utilize the time as efficiently as a freelancer already sitting at home in his office.

Too, commuting to work is expensive. The cost of keeping even a junker in running condition mounts as do gasoline and insurance costs — and most businesses encourage their workers to drive expensive cars rather than junkers. Additionally, there's an added element of danger in commuting, especially in areas with poor driving conditions or heavy traffic; even if a commuter avoids an accident, it's likely that the stress of driving in such conditions will take its toll on mental and physical health.

Too, freelance writers can handle other chores at home. Many freelance writers also baby sit with their children or run a mail-order business on the side. They can write when they feel like it. The "work day" can start at five AM or eleven PM. Or be broken up into hour stretches followed by hour breaks.

Freelancers can even work after hours while holding down a full-time job. And some freelancers are also nine-to-five writers! Freelancing can be a way to bring in additional money where it would otherwise be impossible to do so.

Finally, many of the costs of working at home are tax-deductible. Travel expenses, special equipment, reference books, computer, software, etc., etc., are all deductible. Furthermore, if you're writing about things that interest you, your business takes over many of the areas that "regular" people fill with hobbies. The big difference is that your business expenses are tax deductible while their hobby isn't. This can amount to large sums of money in a year's time. (So keep careful records, be aware of what you can and can't deduct, and learn how to fill out your own income-tax forms. Taxes are a hassle, but they also offer a way to keep more of your money if you know how to take advantage of deductions.)

Sit down and decide which type of writer you want to be. If you're holding a full-time job, you can try freelancing on the side to see how you like it. Likewise, if freelancing isn't working for you, you can always continue to write but do so part-time and get a second job as a paid employee. Being a writer is not dependent on your being one or the other type of worker.

If you decide to work full-time for an employer, you should realize that the fastest way to gain a writing job is to know an insider in the business you're interested in working for. There just isn't any substitute for this. Furthermore, many announced positions

are actually already spoken for. The announcement is made to make it appear that everyone has a shot at the job; this keeps the company (or more often government agency) from running into lawsuits from minority groups or others. In fact, someone is already waiting in the wings to sign on the dotted line. And if you know an insider, this someone can be you.

With this in mind, the best way of making contacts within companies, as well as discovering what it's really like to work for a business, is to obtain freelance work with them. This enables you to get a feel for how they do things. You'll also discover the scuttlebutt, how fast of a job turnover there is, and so forth. *And*, it will give you that important inside contact that will lead to actually obtaining the job if you decide you need it. Therefore, freelancing is often the first step to procuring a full-time job.

There are several books that can help you land the information-writing job you want when you've located a company that interests you. One that gives a realistic if somewhat cynical picture of things is Garth Brockman's *Guerrilla Tactics in the Job Market*, available for $20 from Paladin Press, P. O. Box 1307, Boulder, CO 80306, (800) 642-8300, ext. 24. (While I certainly can't recommend that you engage in some of Brockman's more misleading tactics, some of his ideas about writing resumes and "working" the interview are quite good.)

Another good book is Richard Nelson Bolles' *What Color Is Your Parachute?* (available for $9.50 from Ten Speed Press, P.O. Box 7123, Berkeley, CA 94707). The book takes a realistic if laid back look at things and also offers good tactics for getting past the front desk to actually reach the person who might hire you.

Other books you may wish to check are James Wilson's *Freelance Writer's Handbook* (costing $12.95); Jo Frohbieter-Mueller's *Stay Home and Mind Your Own Business* ($9.95); Bernard Kamoroff's *Small-Time Operator: How to Start Your Own Small Business, Keep Your Books, Pay Your Taxes, and Stay Out of Trouble* (for $12.95). All three books are available from Loompanics Unlimited, P. O. Box 1197, Port Townsend, WA 98368. (For shipping and handling, add $3 for 1 to 3 books, or $6.00 for 4 or more.)

As to freelancing, there are many ways to locate jobs. In general, it's safer to land enough small jobs to make one decent salary. This keeps you from becoming dependent on just one or two employers.

At first, you'll want to accept *any* writing assignment that pays. As you become more efficient and become better known, you'll want to become more selective. At that point, you'll take on projects that are easier to do and/or pay better money. Remember, the bottom line is having enough cash to support yourself in the style which you wish to live. If you want to crusade in print, that's fine. But be sure you don't get sidetracked with too many poor-paying projects that support "causes" you're interested in. If you go broke, you won't be doing anyone any good.

Knowing when to turn down a project is as important as bringing in work. If you can't handle the assignment, don't take it; slopping up a job will ruin your chance of ever working for a potential employer and — eventually — the word will get around.

Be courteous in turning down jobs, even if the assignment seems offensive or is something you aren't able to handle because of time or research limitations. Always make it clear that you are interested in future projects and let the person who's presented the offer know they can call you with future deals. Often one failed offer will lead to future work.

It's important to know how to bargain for higher payments for articles or other projects. Generally, it's good to go with the first few offers from a business and then bargain for more money on later projects with the same employer. This will let you get your foot in the door and also allows your employer to see what kind of work you do. Don't be too rigid in bargaining; be ready to compromise or you may end up with nothing.

Locating writing projects is frequently as time-consuming as doing the actual writing. First, you need to develop several cover letters. These should explain who you are, what writing projects you've worked on, and what you're proposing for the business you're contacting. On your word processor, create several "boiler plate" letters that can have a company's name and address "plugged into" them and use these for your mailings. This will save time and money while still looking "personal" to whomever it goes to.

One of the first rules freelance writers have to discover is that you should *never* call yourself a "freelance" writer. This seems to be especially true in the computer industry. Instead, freelance writers in many fields are "information writing consultants" or other such things. (Yes, this is ridiculous, but what do you expect from a culture that calls garbage collectors "sanitation engineers" or janitors, "custodians?" Remember that your goal is to make money; if that

means calling yourself something else, jump into the crazy games companies play.)

You may even wish to expand your freelance operation — on paper — into a business. In such a case, you can have "company stationary" printed. This allows you to become the president of your small firm and — should you need to hire a secretary to help with your overload should things become really good for you, you'll be all set. If you already have a "company," you don't have to revamp your operation each time it grows. Become the "Podunk Publishers Technical Service" or some such thing; make it sound impressive. Sometimes the writing business is involved in selling dreams every bit as much as Madison Avenue is!

If possible, you should purchase stationary with a fancy letterhead printed on quality paper. This is one place where you don't want to skimp on money. You may be working in a room that looks like a dungeon while you wear a dirty sweat shirt that says "Writers do it on the keyboard." But you need to give potential employers the impression that they're dealing with someone in a three-piece suit working out of a high-rise, glassed-in office with expensive office furniture and a crew of mannequin-like secretaries.

The letters typed on your expensive stationery should be very polished and easy to read. Use short sentences and try to keep each letter as concise as possible. You should also create a small packet of xerox copies of any articles you've got into print; this can be included with your letter as a writing sample.

Don't mislead people about your qualifications. But remember that no one else is going to be lauding your abilities either. So don't be afraid to put your best foot forward and sell yourself when making initial contacts

with your letters. (Just take care not to sound like a pompous braggart.)

If you have a specific area that you're interested in writing for, finding the magazines and journals that serve as a forum for the industries will give you your starting point. Look through the magazines and note the companies advertising in them. These companies are your potential employers. These magazines can also help you become familiar with the jargon of the field you may be writing for and who the "biggies" are in terms of hardware and business.

Once you've absorbed such information from the publications, you can start concentrating on securing employment. One route is to write for the magazines you've searched through. By writing articles for them, you can make your name recognized by the firms you might later get work from. If there are any publishers who have advertised books and manuals in the magazines, this is another potential source of writing projects which you should check into (more on writing books and articles later).

Magazines and journals will also often have "want ads" that may lead you to companies looking for information writers. There are many leads for you to follow if you search for them.

Occasionally, you may discover a magazine or, more commonly a company's technical manual, that's poorly written. These can be an opportunity *if* you can diplomatically point out the business's need for a technical proof-reader to catch their mistakes. Many companies are concerned about making manuals clearer and easier to use. Such businesses will therefore be interested in hiring you for such work. Just don't beat them over the head with their mistakes in

trying to sell your abilities; doing so will put them on the defensive. And you'll lose any chance of getting a job.

All of these potential sources of writing assignments should be contacted until you've secured enough work to make a go of it. If you're trying to write technical manuals or documentation for businesses, then you'll need to contact the sales and marketing directors at various businesses. If you're working toward writing articles or books, contact editors. Magazine editors are generally listed in the publication so you can write to them by name. Just be sure you're contacting the "boss editor" — some magazines call their writers "contributing editors" or some such thing. But then, you're not a freelance writer, either, right?

Those looking for a full-time job should keep in mind that magazines and book publishers are sometimes looking for editors. Landing a job like this via a letter or phone call is a shot in the dark. But if you can handle such a job, it doesn't hurt to take a long shot. You should address your communications to the manager's or publisher's office.

Of course, the quickest way to make contacts is not by letter. It's by phone. Some people do well with phone calls and will have good — and quick — success by taking this route rather than sending letters. If you're one of these people, by all means use your phone.

But most people don't have success in getting writing projects over the phone with their *initial* contact with a company. Generally, you'll discover that the person says something to the effect that, "Yes, we're interested. Send us a letter. Have a good day." Click. Dial tone. You end up sending your letter and

writing proposal anyway and have wasted your time and money on the phone call. If you try a few calls and discover you're among those who have little initial success with phone calls, don't be discouraged, because this is how it is for most people first starting out in the freelance business.

If the business you want to contact is within driving distance, you can also call the appropriate personnel, make an appointment, and drop in to give your spiel in person. That means dressing up and a lot of extra work. But if you have the "threads" and are proud of your good looks, you might as well take advantage of the opportunity. Do be sure the people you see understand that you'll be working freelance — oops — as contract help or a consultant.

Usually, a business hiring you to work freelance will be happy to let you work at home. If there's any hesitancy about this, you can suggest that you work by the job rather than the hour. This way, they'll not have visions of you watching a soap opera all week and charging them by the hour while you goof off.

If there's still hesitancy about letting you work from your home, you might point out how social you are and how easy it is to get distracted with all the office personnel around you (there's truth to this and they'll probably agree). Or you can plead an allergy to the boss's cigar, the new vinyl upholstery, or some such thing.

Whether you're calling, going in for an interview, or sending out letters, one of the tough things about freelancing is learning to deal with having the

majority of your proposals rejected or not even answered. You must learn to live with this situation and let rejections bounce off your skin without creating wounds. Treat each rejection as a personal affront and you'll never get anywhere.

Instead, assume that you have to send forty, fifty, or even a hundred proposals for each acceptance. If you look at rejections as part of the game, they won't get to you. Continue to plug away. Even if you don't land a job, your letter will make an impression and may pave the way for future jobs should you contact the company again.

This is tough to realize. And it makes that first book, article, or manual to land a contract for you all the more exciting and encouraging just because it is that first one. Usually, what happens, is a budding writer creates his book proposal (or even the entire book), polishes it until it looks really good to him, and then he starts mailings to potential publishers. The writer then waits. And waits. And finally gets a rejection (xeroxed, form-letter, and very impersonal). Or he gets nothing at all.

Many good writers give up at this point and never get any work. If you're starting, you should remember that an abundance of rejections normally occur before even the most successful of articles or books finally gets into print.

The secret is to be persistent. You keep sending proposals and manuscripts out, polishing them a bit from time to time as you become a better writer. You also change concepts and proposals to be more applicable to the publisher or business you're contacting. You keep this up until you finally get into print. That may

take 25 or more rejections and may take years for any given idea, but you have to keep at it.

Save rejection letters. They'll often contain the name and address of the person you'll need to contact at a company if you have a future proposal. Furthermore, if the company should happen to contact you with a job they've come up with, you'll have all the pertinent information including names and addresses of the company officials.

Also create a computer file of everyone you contact with proposals. The file should contain the date the proposals were sent, addresses, etc. If you have a phone number, that should be added, too. You may even wish to key the lists according to what industry the company is involved in so you can quickly locate similar companies that might be interested in a future writing project you may devise later. Back the file up so it isn't lost and update it regularly. As your list grows, it can become a very valuable source of information for you.

If you're in a large metropolitan area, with industries involved in work that you might write about, don't hesitate to contact these businesses for writing projects.

One trick you can use with local or other businesses is to search the want ads for companies looking for technical writers. Send such companies your letter and list of work you've done. The "hook" in this case is that you include a short note explaining the advantages of using contract help (you) instead of hiring a full-time writer. Stress the fact that this will enable the company to avoid having to hire someone to cover their peak workload periods and that they won't have

to fool with social security payments, health insurance, or other perks they normally offer their workers.

Another source of local work is to check with businesses who place temporaries; occasionally they'll need information writers. Not only will this give you a part-time job, it will give you a chance to get your foot into the door of businesses which might be interested in hiring you for various freelance projects. Let "temporary" services know that you're capable of doing documentation, writing manuals, and the like and they may be able to land you some extra work.

If you have a modem, exploit it to place your name and address on various BBSs and let people know that you're available for writing projects. You'll get few if any results from the smaller "hobbyist" bulletin boards. But you may get results from the larger, more professional BBSs. Also, don't forget that CompuServe has a large, national bulletin board as well as forums devoted to journalism and other areas of business and entertainment which need information writers. Take advantage of these services. (These can also be useful ways of making contacts if you're looking for a full-time job as well.)

Letting potential employers know that you have a modem isn't a bad idea either. Occasionally a company, magazine, or other business will need a manual or a polished article in a matter of minutes when someone misses a deadline. If you're capable of writing such a piece and sending it to them an hour or so later via a modem, it could be a powerful plus that would enable you to save the day. (And such an accomplishment would undoubtedly earn you "points" with that company.)

There are several large companies that act as "co-publishers." These companies do nothing but create books and manuals for other businesses. These "co-publishers" receive the subject and general outline for the book and then turn around and hire writers to do the actual work. While many of these projects are handled "in house" by a staff on the co-publisher's payroll, sometimes these outfits hire freelancers. Therefore, if you can locate such a company, it's wise to contact them.

Unfortunately, it isn't that easy to locate co-publishers. Often they have all the writers they need lined up and they generally advertise by direct mail. Sometimes you can locate one in a round-about manner by contacting printing companies (who may do the actual printing of manuals created by the co-publisher) or by contacting book companies and asking for the names of their co-publishers. Both methods require a lot of work and often come to dead ends, however. (In the past, the co-publisher, Waite Group of Sausalito, CA, would occasionally give jobs to freelancers. But since word of this has slowly leaked out, the company has been swamped. Therefore, you'll likely do well to avoid trying to find work with this company unless you want to put up with some stiff competition — often from people willing to work for very little.)

Just as you pick up leads from magazines, newspapers, or journals, it's also possible to reverse tactics and place an ad offering your services in publications. Want ads will seldom send much business your way (most company personnel are too busy

to sit around searching these ads). But a display ad might work. Display ads are expensive so you'll need to decide how good a potential market is before trying to get your feet wet in advertising.

Any such ad must be concise and should encourage anyone that's even vaguely interested to call or write for more information. The ad should be a way for you to get your foot into the door so you can bombard a potential employer with your letter, resume, and writing samples. So write the ad to draw inquiries, not actual jobs, and you'll be more apt to succeed with this tactic.

After you get your feet wet with a few articles, books, and/or manuals, you should also consider working as a "ghost writer" or "co-author." There are several ways to go about obtaining such work.

One way is to get an agent and let him handle rounding up projects for you. Legitimate agents will do this for a cut of the money you make (usually 10 to 20 percent). You can find a list of agents in the *Writer's Handbook*, available at most public libraries. (If you can't find this publication, you can obtain a list of agents by sending a SASE to the Society of Authors' Representatives, 39½ Washington Square South, New York, NY 10012, or try the Independent Literary Agents Association, Inc., Sanford J. Greenburger Associates, 55 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10003.)

Most agents are based in New York. However, if you're most qualified to write manuals for the automotive industry, say, then you'll probably do better

with an agent closer to Detroit. Likewise, if you're "into" computers, then an agent based near Silicon Valley in California would be more valuable than one in New York or Detroit. Do a little thinking before you start contacting agents.

If you find an agent, get things settled up front as to which of your writing projects he'll be getting his percentage fees from. You should agree only to let him handle a certain type of book, manual, or writing project. Make sure that he understands that he'll not get a cut of any magazine articles or other work you do on your own.

In addition to ghost writing projects, many agents may be able to land you other writing projects. Therefore, an agent can be a very valuable asset.

Unfortunately, most agents won't handle you unless you have a track record of past successes. Therefore, don't waste your time trying to get an agent until you've got several works in print.

Pick your agent carefully and ask for references. There are a few agents that make their money by charging reading and re-write fees — and never actually securing any writing contracts.

While you're flipping the classified ads of various large newspapers and large magazines, you'll also note ads like "We're looking for people to write young adult books..." or "We need books to publish..." or such things. These are generally come-ons by businesses that will publish your book — if you pay for the

work yourself (more on this in a bit) but they also make many grand promises to market your book — and never follow through with them. Don't get mixed up in deals that look too good to be true — they are.

It is possible to create your own book ideas and contact publishers, however (and, in fact, that's how this book came to be). This works well. All you need is a publisher and a book idea to peddle.

Finding the publisher isn't always easy. *The Writer's Handbook* and *Writer's Digest*, (Box 2123, Halan, IA 45207, (800) 333-0133) as well as similar publications do list a number of the big publishing companies. But there are a whale of a lot of companies not mentioned in these sources and these small companies pay quite well. Many freelancers would starve (this author included) if they could only work for the publishers listed in *The Writers Handbook*!

Presently, the only good way to locate these small publishers is to find their ads in magazines covering subjects you wish to write a book about. Visit your local library and/or magazine stand, collect some magazines, and leaf through them, noting the book ads that appear there. Again, you'll need to create a computer file of names, addresses, and phone numbers along with the dates and titles of the proposals you send to various publishers.

Your next step is to mail letters with your book proposals. And wait. Some of the companies you contact will be self-publishers run by an author who's decided to print and market his own books. These guys generally won't have the cash to add more titles to

their one-book catalog. But most of the publishers, especially if they're carrying books by more than one author, will be interested in adding more books and will want to see your ideas.

If you should hit two companies that are interested in your proposal, go with the best offer. Don't try to pit one publisher against the other — you'll just create ill will. And be sure to send a polite letter to the runner up — perhaps with another proposal; generally it's better to come right out and say that their offer wasn't quite up to your expectations *and* that you're going with another publisher. If you simply say the amount of the offer wasn't enough, you might get a second proposal. Turning that one down might cause some real ill will when the publisher discovers you had already cut another deal with someone else.

But first, you need the book idea to write a proposal for.

Chances are, you'll have some good ones in mind. Frankly, you can't have too many ideas, since some will be rejected by everyone you send them to. You can't just make one proposal, write the book, then move to a second one. You'd starve. Instead you must keep proposals floating about while you keep turning out the books you get contracts for. If you have trouble inventing ideas for books, then you need to look through the magazines you've collected to find publishers and check out the subjects being covered in the magazine as well as in its advertising.

Are there articles on "how-to" do something or other? If so, the basic premise of an article might be expanded into a book about several similar projects. Keep your mind open and do a little creative thinking

about similar books or ways of altering the idea or giving it a new slant for your own book proposal.

Once you've got a book idea, you're ready to "pitch" it. You can't afford to write an entire manuscript and take months or years to send it to each publisher and wait for an acceptance or rejection. You can eventually sell a book this way, but you may die of old age before it happens.

A better way of doing things is to make a book proposal and send it to everyone who might be interested. If you're lucky, someone will make an offer and ask to see a full outline and some sample chapters. It's also possible that no one will be interested in the idea. If they aren't, all you've lost is your postage and the time it took to crank out the letters and proposal on your word processor. Writing an entire book and having it rejected can set you back by months. So writing a proposal is the best route to take.

There are a zillion ways to write a proposal. The proposal on pages 73 & 74 is the one I used for this book.

As you read through this, you'll see that this synopsis of the book serves *two* purposes. One, of course, is to sell the book. The other, and just as important, is to give the publisher an idea of exactly what will and will not be in the book. This lets him know what he'll be getting and allows him to see whether or not he's already carrying similar books. (The fact that it is similar is not necessarily a drawback. If a similar book has been selling well, a publisher may wish to add another nearly identical book to gain repeat sales.)

YOU CAN BE AN INFORMATION WRITER (Working title)

by Duncan Long

(address and phone number)

TARGET MARKET: Practically anyone interested in writing for the nonfiction market.

SCOPE: Content of the book can be altered to suit the publisher (because the author has experience writing fiction, it might also be expanded to both markets).

STYLE: The book will be written in a straight-forward style with the author drawing from his own experience as well as that of other writers to give the reader techniques to quickly develop his skills and get into print.

SUBJECTS WHICH CAN BE COVERED INCLUDE: Writing for both the book and magazine markets; finding markets (including those not listed in the writer's guide, etc.); the "pitch" for your new book or article; contacting editors (ways to save time and work while assuring there's a market for your ideas); the "hook" (and how it is different from fiction and between the book and magazine markets); writing your own book ad copy (to improve sales and help your editor); how much humor should you use; what "language" should be used; nonfiction doesn't mean "boring;" how to become an "expert" in your writing field.

How to increase the money you make through "plugs" (without compromising your integrity or credibility); how to find good reference materials; thinking up new book/magazine ideas; illustrations that sell books and articles (with the editor as well as the reader); getting free photos for use in books and articles; should you take your own photos?; word processor or typewriter — which is best for you?; recycling your ideas (to get paid several times for one good idea — without getting an editor or readers mad at you); making the most of your time for maximum output; one secret for success: "try, try again;" etc.

COMPETITION: the author knows of no similar book currently on the market; there are several books dealing only with fiction writing but these will not be in direct competition to this book.

LENGTH: author will work toward publisher's ideal length.

DEADLINE: the author will be able to complete this work within 6 months' time depending on other commitments at the time the contract is offered.

ADVANCE: Because of the time needed to complete the manuscript, the author would appreciate an advance to cover expenses incurred in not working on other book and magazine projects.

The proposal shown here is not perfect. Undoubtedly you'll be able to develop a better one of your own. You might, for example, want to mention illustrations you have for the book or add other headings. But this should give you a general idea to build from.

After you get several books into print, you may wish to add a step before actually sending written proposals. This is to phone publishers and ask if they'd be interested in seeing the proposal. This tactic doesn't save money; it may even cost more, given the cost of phone bills. But it does save time and will help you make sales faster, which can become important as your writing career progresses.

Do *not* call publishers you don't know. Doing so will waste your time and may make a publisher angry with you for bothering him without "paying your dues" by having gone through channels.

Whether you're calling an editor about a book or a marketing manager about a proposal, it's wise to have a "script" on your desk so you don't stumble around making your presentation. Jot down the topics you'll

cover in your article or book, talk about the length, photos, and any selling points such as public interest, competition, or the like. In short, *sell* your idea.

An added benefit of calling editors or marketing managers is that you'll stay in the forefront in their dealings. Often, if they have a project lined up, you'll be able to land it by keeping in contact with them.

Some of my most lucrative books have come about when a publisher called with a project, wondering if I'd consider tackling it. Likewise, an editor or marketing manager may like elements of your idea but reject your initial way of working it. In such a case, if you're flexible, you can often rework the proposal in a few minutes of conversation and end up with a contract.

Phone calls, to potential employers you know, work in landing writing jobs *provided* you're able to sell your idea *and* be flexible enough to go with a counter proposal or new idea. These calls are not the place to be rigid or play the part of a prima donna. Stay open to suggestions and keep things low key and friendly, even if your idea is rejected — there's always tomorrow.

After you've sent enough proposals, someone will probably have an interest in one or more of them. You may be able to get a contract just from such a proposal *if* you have a track record of having written several books. But if you have few or no books in print (and often even if you do), chances are the publisher will ask for an outline before he'll make a commitment with a contract.

When it comes time to write your outline, you need to show exactly what you're going to do. The publisher

needs to see *exactly* what you know and what will be included in your book. Some beginning writers are fearful of telling everything that will be in the book for fear someone will steal their ideas.

In reality, this is not a problem in the publishing business these days. The reason is simple: if the publisher likes the idea, it's easier to just hire you to write the book rather than hunt up another writer to do it and perhaps run into legal conflicts in the process. If you get "crafty" and try to hide some of your ideas, the publisher is going to think you don't know the answers and isn't going to make an offer.

Forget the "I., A., 1., a." style of outlines that they teach you in college. No one in the publishing business uses these — except beginners who don't know better (a group this author was in for some time!). Instead, divide things up by chapters with several paragraphs or sentence fragments telling what will be in it.

Time spent on the outline is far from wasted. In addition to landing a book contract, it has an added benefit. If your outline has been carefully laid out, it will serve for the "bones" of your book. You can cut up your outline and create a computer file for each chapter. This makes it possible to actually write each chapter by expanding your outline (another advantage of using a word processor).

By way of example, here's a portion of the outline created for this book. It isn't being presented as a great gem to be slavishly copied for your own outlines. Instead, employ it as the basis or starting point for your own outline. Here's the initial outline for this book:

OUTLINE FOR:
YOU CAN BE AN INFORMATION WRITER

by Duncan Long

Intro

Chapter 1: Getting Started
- Full time or part time?
- Pen name?
- Equipment you need: word processor or typewriter — which is best for you? printers, programs, not spending too much for office equipment
- Should you take your own photos?
  - Look at cameras and film
- The hardest thing about writing is writing
- Tricks to get started writing
- Don't spend too much
- Agents

Chapter 2: Finding Work
- 9 to 5
- Pros and cons of working at home
- Pros and cons of working for someone else
- Thinking up new book/magazine ideas;
- Writing for both the book and magazine markets;
- Finding markets (including those not listed in the writer's guide, etc.)
- The "pitch" for your new book or article;
- Contacting editors (ways to save time and work while assuring that there's a market for your ideas)
  - Recycling your ideas (to get paid several times for one good idea — without getting an editor or readers mad at you)
- Making the most of your time for maximum output;
- The secret for success: "try, try again;" etc.

Chapter 3: Research
- Before you land the job
- How to find good reference materials
- Telephones
- Keeping costs down
- Toll free?
- Government agencies
- Libraries: Public and national depositories

Chapter 4: The Basic Techniques of Writing
- Outlines and notes?
- Make it clear
- Who is your audience ("as most readers know...")
- Write and re-write; polish is important
- Editing: editors don't!
- Final form for submission

Chapter 5: Writing a Magazine Article or Short Booklet
- How much humor should you use;
- What "language" should be used;
- Nonfiction doesn't mean "boring;"
- Illustrations that sell books and articles
  - Getting free photos for use in books and articles
- How to become an "expert" in your writing field
- How to increase the money you make through "plugs" (without compromising your integrity or credibility)

Chapter 6: Writing a Book
- Outlines
- Ad copy (to improve sales and help your editor);

Chapter 7: Branching out
- Friend's story
- Consultation/freelance work
- Going to work for an organization
- Editing
- Fiction
- Print it yourself? Pros and cons
- "Housework"
- Turning hobbies into work
- Travel & vacations

Chapter 8: Recap

Comparing this outline with the current table of contents, you'll discover that Chapter 2, about setting up an office and a look at computers, wasn't included in the outline. That's because a later chapter containing it became too big and the information became a chapter of its own. Also, I decided that the material needed to appear earlier in the book. Consequently,

setting up an office became Chapter 2 and this chapter you're reading (Chapter 3) is listed as Chapter 2 in the outline.

Too, what were Chapters 5 and 6 in the outline finally got incorporated into this and other chapters. The same thing happened to several other chapters after I'd entered the "heat of battle" that accompanies writing a book or extended manual.

Obviously, it's not essential to follow the outline point for point. At the same time, most of the material appearing in the outline *should* appear in the finished manuscript so your publisher doesn't get any shock or demand that you rework your manuscript and include what was promised in the outline.

After your publisher sees your outline, if you're lucky he'll offer you a contract. More likely, he'll ask for a manuscript and then, if you're fortunate, he'll offer to pay you royalties *after* it goes into print.

If you're freelancing, once that first book proposal is accepted, the manuscript worked out, and your tome finally in print, it still doesn't get easier (unless the first one is a bestseller — doubtful for most information writers). Each book will be a new struggle, not much easier than the first, for the first three or four books.

After you've got a few books published with one company, things get easier. You may be able to land a contract with just a phone call, a proposal, or an outline. The neat thing about the work at this point in your writing career is you don't waste time writing a manuscript that a publisher expresses interest in and then decides it doesn't want.

Unfortunately, you often can't afford to limit your books to just one publisher. Those companies not

carrying your books are going to be a new struggle. Even though you may have books in print with company X, it won't make too much difference to company Y. Consequently, while you're no longer a "rank beginner," you'll probably have to complete manuscripts to get another publisher — which is practically like starting over.

But, many information writers find that around book number ten, the author has enough of a name that other publishers will start to take notice of you. And you may even be able to sell ideas your main publisher isn't interested in to the smaller book dealers. Eventually, you'll land as much work as you can keep up with — and that's a nice problem to have!

It should be added that the same thing goes on with magazine articles. Once you've started working with an editor, it's often possible to phone him with an idea and get a tentative promise to print the article when it's finished. This saves time since you know where to send what you've written and it has a good chance of ending up in print. The catch here is that if the editor doesn't like what you've done, you may be out of luck, especially with highly specialized magazines. But this usually doesn't happen once an editor has made a commitment.

Finding suitable magazines is like finding publishers: check into the *Writers' Handbook* at the nearest magazine stand. Proposals can be in the same form as for the books; the basic outline listed above will work well, too. And — after you've worked with an editor for a while but *not* before — you can phone and bounce your ideas off him or her to save time.

Always keep your book proposals, book manuscripts, and magazine articles saved on computer disc or hard drive. If you do this, you'll often discover that parts of previous books and articles can be pulled, reworked, and used in current projects. It's also often possible to create a book by combining several related magazine articles and then adding other material to them. This is another big plus of using a computer-based word processor; take advantage of it. Another advantage of using a word processor is that you can "crank out" several similar articles once you've done the basic research for one.

Care has to be taken with this, however. A case in point happened to me when I first started working with a word processor; I created a second article around the basic idea of the first. Although it was word-for-word different, and the illustrations were different, the editor of the second magazine threw a fit when he saw my original article in print. He crammed the photos and manuscript into an envelope (ruining the photos in the process) and scribbled a note telling me never, ever to send anymore blankity blank articles to him.

Part of the problem with the editor, probably, was he'd been peddling my articles as having been written by a Major someone or other — the name changed from article to article — for the Air Force, Army, or whoever was needed in his military-style magazine. Probably he figured his credibility would have been ruined if a reader had seen both articles and put two and two together. Writing two articles so alike was a dumb thing to do on my part and — looking back —

I don't blame the guy too much, though I hate to see editors mislead their readers.

So you can use one magazine article to generate another. But you *must* get a new slant on the second article and, out of courtesy, you should tell the editor that you've submitted a similar article to another magazine *and* detail how the two articles differ. This will prevent a panic if he sees the first one in print. When in doubt, don't submit a second article if you can't get it different enough to make a new article. Also bear in mind that, due to publishing deadlines, an article you send *first* may appear in print *second*. Therefore, you'd be wise to give some thought to warning the first editor as well. Don't be afraid to recycle your ideas — or those of other authors. But don't go overboard.

Make the most of your time when writing. Go for projects that pay well and — as your career progresses — drop publishers or companies that don't pay well. Before dropping a company, make an appeal for more money for your services — sometimes they'll agree!

One variation of recycling ideas is to create a book from an article series *or* make a series of articles from a book. *Or* create a series of books off an original book idea. All of these are easily done with many subjects and will appeal to a publisher or editor if your original book sold well or your article generated a lot of interest.

Such books and articles are easy to do if the original was done on a word processor. In such a case, the original document on computer disc or hard drive can serve as a "template" or expanded outline. Often you can go through the original and lift whole chunks and ideas that can be used in the sequel. Just be sure to

rework and add to the material so your editor and readers don't feel like they've been ripped off.

The nice thing about this system is that readers who liked your first book or article will be interested in reading your next one. Subsequent additions to the series are supported by the reputation (and advertising). Furthermore, you can "plug" your other books or articles in the series so new readers unfamiliar with the first entries will be looking for them. In this way, the publications build upon each other.

A variation on plugging previous books and articles you've written is known in the writing business as "placing land mines" in a book or article. Basically, a land mine is a plug for a product. It's a sort of mini-ad that will turn your readers into customers who will buy the products you're writing about. This can help you directly if you plug your own books or publications. It can get you into the good graces of other companies if you plug their products. Provided you're really sold on the product you recommend and it will really be of help to the buyer, most readers are happy to see these bits of information. Many readers will actually appreciate the land mines since the "mini-ad" will enable them to purchase something related to the article. Just be sure not to overdo such plugs or to give glowing reports about something that is inferior — doing either will cause readers to lose their respect for you and actually avoid other of your works.

Make the most of your time and work toward your maximum writing output. Don't waste time on the phone or in answering letters that won't be making you

money. And when someone rejects your writing proposals, don't get discouraged; instead, "try, try again." That's half the secret of becoming a successful writer.

• 4 •

Researching Your Writing Projects

As noted in previous chapters, the most important thing for you to think about in writing is how much money each project will bring in and how long it will take to write it. You must always maximize the cash you earn and minimize your operating and research costs. And you must produce as much as possible in the shortest time.

To gain enough work to bring in the money you require, you must learn to be very flexible in the subjects you can tackle. Many people assume that the only way to gain such knowledge is to earn a college degree in the subject being written about or to spend long years laboring in the field covered. These things would help, but they are *not* essential.

Information writers sell information, not expertise or experience. You need not be skilled in actually performing a task or know all the details about something in order to write knowledgeably about it. But you do need reliable information.

The essential is knowing where to find the information and how to do the research needed to become an "expert" in the field you're writing about in a few weeks' time rather than in months or years. The secret is knowing how to research the subject you'll be writing about.

This is the most poorly kept secret in the world. Most high school kids get a good going over in how to research their term papers. And when you get down to it, most non-fiction books and magazine articles are simply glorified research papers.

Yet most people are completely baffled at how any given information author could "know so much" about so many different subjects. The answer is simple: he doesn't, but he knows how to find the information. And if you can find the information and can rework it into easily-understood articles or book chapters, then you can make a fair income.

Even in today's electronic age, the best source of information is still the library. If you're doing very detailed technical writing, access to a library that is devoted to your subject is a big asset. For example, if you were writing articles about new laws, having access to a Law College's legal library would be a big plus.

If you're employed by a large company, newspaper, or publisher, they will often have their own libraries. Sometimes you may even have access to an SDI (Selective Dissemination of Information) system. This will allow you to give a librarian a subject (say "Modern Jet Engines") and the librarian can then search for all the information on the subject and route it directly to your desk. This allows you to do your research from your desk, as it were.

Another resource that many people don't know about are the national depository libraries. University libraries in this system receive many of the thousands of books printed by the US Federal Government every year. Many of these will have the hard facts you can't find anywhere else *and* the material isn't copyrighted. You can lift charts and information directly from the government documents.

Additionally, many of these national depository libraries are connected to local libraries by the inter-library loan program. That means, to get a government document or book, all you do is call the university's library, have them locate the book or manual you want, and then give that title and number to your local library. They'll contact the repository and have them mail the book. When it comes in, the library calls you and you go pick up the book. All this takes only several days and your charge is the cost of the postage to send the book (which is usually quite cheap since the books are sent via special low library rates).

Librarians at the reference desk are another "asset" you'll need to employ regularly. They'll be able to steer you to the right books or data banks and will also be aware of special reference books that may have just the information you need for a writing project. Often,

you'll actually get more information than you require so your task becomes picking and choosing the best rather than trying to get enough to make do.

(Go out of your way to shower reference desk librarians with praise whenever they help you. And don't be above "bribing" them with gifts of chocolates or other goodies for their past services.)

A good library will give you a wide array of encyclopedias (general as well as geared to specific lines of endeavor) and other reference books, as well as books and magazines about various subjects. Plan on spending some time in various libraries in your area.

Many large city libraries are now using an "on-line catalog" for their books rather than the traditional card catalog. These can be worked like the old-fashioned card catalog to allow searches by author, subject, or title. Their big plus is that they're often tied into other libraries so you can locate books in other libraries that can be borrowed via inter-library loan. Too, if the book is checked out, it will be noted on the book's "card" in the computer. This keeps you from going on wild goose chases in the stacks.

When researching for job markets by purchasing magazines, you'll probably discover several which often have information that would be of use in your subsequent writing projects. If back issues of these magazines are available at a library (either as the originals or in microfilm form) they will be a tremendous asset.

(If the library doesn't subscribe to the publications, then you need to. Just take care to subscribe only to enough magazines to cover your subject; if there's an overlap of information, you may wish to drop your subscription to one or another of the publications.)

Be sure to save these magazines, newsletters, or what have you, if they contain useful information. Even if you don't have an immediate need for them as reference materials, chances are they will be useful in the future. So don't get carried away with house cleaning and do away with a potential source of invaluable information.

Of course, finding *the* article in a stack of magazines can be a real headache. Some magazines and newsletters will have a yearly index issue. Keep track of these and keep the magazines in order, so you can use the index easily.

Some major magazines are also listed in the *Business Periodicals Index*, *Magazine Index*, *Public Affairs Information Service*, *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, *Social Sciences Index*, *Ulrich's*, or similar publications found in most libraries; some of these won't be profitable since the magazines you're interested in may not be aimed at the general public. These can be useful for general, background information or as a lead to finding dates, people, or places that you may need to track down for further research.

Many large libraries will also have a computerized reference data bank that can be used; these will cost money (and may be accessible via your own computer over a modem — be sure you're not duplicating a service you already have through CompuServe or some other system). With many magazines, you'll find no yearly index or other publications to help you. Often,

this will mean you'll actually have to sit down and look through the index of each magazine to find any pertinent articles dealing with your project. If you're the owner of a pile of such magazines, one trick that often helps out is to fold pages over, mark articles with paper clips, or leave magazines open to articles you found of interest when you first read them. Often you'll be returning to these for information. If the magazine has been left open or a page bent, the articles are easier to find and you can save yourself a lot of time.

Another "quick and dirty" method of collecting reference materials from magazines is to simply rip articles out and file them in a cabinet. The catch to this is that most magazines continue articles into back sections of their publications. This can often lead to having several endings of major articles on one page. Ripping out one article ruins the others for later use.

Consequently, you may discover that the reference materials for your book or magazine projects are better stored in large boxes on shelves in a back room somewhere. This way, you can put the entire magazine into a small box devoted to an article or book along with all the other notes and clippings. Use a magic marker to indicate what the container is devoted to. This method isn't neat or tidy. But it works well for many writers.

The book publishers you're interested in writing for, as well as publishers advertising in magazines you use for reference, will also generally have books or catalogs that you'll require for sources of information as well. Therefore, it's wise to get such publishers'

catalogs and spend a goodly sum on books containing the information you'll be needing. (Just be sure to check your local public library first to be sure the book isn't there. Purchase only books you can't borrow.)

Sometimes you can obtain reference publications without paying cash for them. One way to do this is to write book reviews for a magazine or newsletter. This allows you to get paid for the review *and* request sample books from publishers. By reviewing books and magazines that will double as your reference materials, you'll build your personal reference library at the same time.

Another way to obtain review copies is available if you write articles or books in which you can recommend other publications. If you're writing a book about hurricanes, for example, you might be able to get a publisher to send complimentary copies of other hurricane books in exchange for recommending them "for further reading." This can also be done to obtain complimentary subscriptions to magazines if you contact the editor or marketing manager. This technique can be quite valuable, and it's always worth keeping in mind when writing a book or article.

Sources of "free" information can prove invaluable. These are various catalogs, brochures, and publicity information from many companies. These can be obtained by simply calling the "public information" or publicity department of a large company, explaining what project you're working on, and asking them if they can help you. Since they'll usually be more than happy to get some positive coverage, they'll send you

a wealth of detailed information that isn't available in more general reference books or magazine articles.

Phoning a company can also help you obtain information by talking to the personnel actually involved with a product or in a research effort. These people can give you information about what was tried and proved to be a dead end, who was involved in research and development, and various stories that can add color and interest to a book or an article. (Such "insider" information will also make you seem to be more of an expert than you may feel like. As such, the information will make readers more likely to buy your books and/or editors more likely to purchase your future articles.)

The reference librarian at the public library will be able to steer you to the proper directories listing various companies and corporations nationwide. Once you have the phone numbers and addresses, contact the company. If you're not in a hurry, you can send letters. Eventually they'll probably get routed to the person who can help you. But it's much quicker to make phone calls.

Much the same method can be used to get information and publications from government agencies and government watchdog groups. The secret is in finding the correct agency or group that will have the information. About the only way to do this quickly is to use a telephone.

Start by checking in the telephone directory and try to locate the agency that can help you. If you're in doubt, there are also government information numbers you can call for information; these are listed in the directory as well. Be prepared for a lot of false leads and runarounds. While many government

employees are helpful and nearly all very courteous, the majority are pretty ignorant about where to find information.

Prying information from government agencies is tough. Perseverance and patience are necessities. Always be sure to ask what other agency you might call if the one you've reached proves to be a dud. Keep calling and you'll eventually get to someone that can help you.

Whether you're calling government agencies or private companies, telephone calls can get very expensive. There are several tricks to keeping costs down.

One is to locate toll-free numbers. While there's a directory of toll free numbers, it's often out of date since companies are constantly adding and changing toll-free numbers. Since calling information via a toll-free number doesn't currently cost anything (while regular directory assistance does), it's a lot simpler to dial 1-800-555-1212 and ask if the company or government agency you wish to contact has a toll-free number.

If a company or agency doesn't have a toll-free, you can often phone at lower rates if the entity is located in a time zone west of you. If, for example, you live on the east coast, calling a company in California after the daytime rates change to evening rates can save you a small amount of change. If you consistently make your calls after the rates go down, you can save quite a sum over time.

For those living in time zones in the western US, it's possible to call early in the morning to get lower rates. This isn't quite as easy to do since the rates change to their highest daytime rates at eight AM and office

workers often don't get to their business that early. But it will sometimes work if you're on Pacific time and are calling someone on the east coast or even in the Central Time Zone.

As mentioned earlier, it's possible to use a modem with a micro computer to access information from the many data banks or bulletin boards to be found throughout the US. While the use of these informational services can be expensive both in terms of long-distance telephone charges as well as user's fees of the data bank, information can be obtained from these services that's hard to find elsewhere. Too, it's possible to search through electronic copies of information from various news services, encyclopedias, and popular magazine articles; this can enable a researcher to quickly locate information that's essential for an article.

With most data banks, these searches are conducted by using several key words (the exact procedure varies with the data bank). For example, if you were researching an article about new brain surgery techniques, you could conduct a search through the data banks using "brain surgery" and, perhaps, "modern" or "new" to delimit the search to exclude older forms of brain surgery. Whenever the search discovered an article with all three words, it would then mark it and you could retrieve the article and look at it after the search was over.

The articles discovered in the search could then be "pulled" for your use. These large blocks of information could even be incorporated into a writing project in

the form of credited short quotes or by re-writing segments in your own words to make the information "seamless" with your style and to avoid copyright conflicts.

The catch to such services is that they can be quite expensive. Often, unless you're on a very tight deadline or have a large budget, it'll be more cost effective to spend some time in a library. On the other hand, if you need very up-to-date information or very specific data not found in most libraries, having a modem that can connect you into one of these data banks can be invaluable.

Perhaps the best-known (and most reasonably priced) data service is CompuServe. In addition to having a number of data services, CompuServe has special-interest "forums" (where readers can share information about topics they're interested in) including "Work from Home", "Journalism", and "Writers and Editors" forums. CompuServe also offers a number of data banks, including "IQuest" (which is actually a collection of data banks, including everything from financial, trade and industrial journals, corporate annual reports, and industrial studies, and including some of the data banks offered by more expensive services listed below). Also available from CompuServe are the "Academic American Online" encyclopedia; "MEDLINE," for medical information; and "ENS" (the "Executive News Service" that includes the Associated Press "DataStream" that most newspapers get their stories from). ENS is especially good for information writing research projects since it acts as a sort of "electronic clipping service" to sort through AP news wires, *The Washington Post*, OTC NewsAlert, and Reuters for stories which you select by search words.

These are then held in files for you to access via your modem.

For more information, try CompuServe, 5000 Arlington Center Blvd., Columbus, OH 43220, (800) 848-8199. Cost runs around $40 for the sign-up fee (which includes $25 of credit) with on-line charges running from $6 to $44 per hour depending on the baud rate of your modem (with the system capable of handling newer 9600 bps modems). Added to this is the cost of long-distance charges if you're not in a city that has a local "Telenet" or "Tymnet" system.

There are other data banks that have a wealth of information. The catch is that they cost *big* bucks compared to CompuServe's more reasonable rates. Among these are the BRS series ("Search", "Colleague", and "After Dark" with fees of around $80 per year plus $20 to $80 per hour); Dialog ($25 annual fee and $90 per hour); Lexis (legal research service with charges of $32 per hour plus $10 to $23 per search — and a $125 minimum monthly billing); and NewsNet ($120 annual fee and $60 to $90 per hour). For those willing to pay the prices, addresses are:

BRS Information Technologies
1200 Route 7
Latham, NY 12110
(800) 468-0908

Dialog Information Services
3460 Hillview Ave.
Palo Alto, CA 94304
(800) 334-2564

Lexis/Mead Data Central, Inc.
PO Box 933
Dayton, OH 45401
(800) 543-6862

NewsNet Inc.
945 Haverford Rd.
Bryn Mawr, PA 19010
(800) 345-1301.

How to Look It Up Online by Alfred Glossbrenner (from St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10010 for $16) is an excellent manual that shows how to use databases for research work.

In large cities, you don't *have* to sign up for a computer data bank service that you may only exploit once in a while. Instead, you can use an "information broker". These guys have already got hooked into several data banks and will, for a fee, do the searches for information for you. Some even check into what's at the library as well, thereby doing all the leg work for you. The catch is that all these services cost. But it's cheaper than subscribing to a data bank system that you'll only capitalize on once in a great while. You can find these guys in the yellow pages under "information broker." (As mentioned earlier, some libraries are also tied into some of these systems, so check with the research desk at the library as well.)

Computer bulletin boards, or BBSs, can also be a source of information *if* you can locate one devoted to the right subject. The catch is that the information on them is "free" and therefore varies in quality from ravings of the insane to truly useful information. Wading through the information is frustrating, but sometimes you can find data that isn't to be found elsewhere.

Also, you'll get a glimpse of what people have to say about things. They'll write things that won't appear in print anywhere else. For example, if you're writing an article about a new "Brand X" motorcycle, you may find only glowing reports about it in magazines devoted to covering new motor bikes. But on a BBS devoted to motorcycle "fans", you may discover that the "Brand X" bike that the magazines seem to love has a number of major flaws. The reason the BBS members will talk about the flaws is they don't collect advertising money; the magazine does and therefore doesn't want to be giving any adverse information that will cause a major company to pull its ads.

BBSs can also give you some idea of what the "common man" is thinking, upset about, or is letting off steam about. Thus it's often possible to obtain a glimpse of what's going on among those who don't have to worry about censorship, advertising campaigns, or political polls.

The catch to BBSs is that they're full of misinformation and pretty "gossipy." If you see a bit of information it may — or may not — be true. And if you're not careful, you can waste endless time with useless arguments and discussions carried on with other members of the BBS. Remember that many of the users of a BBS are with it as a hobby, to simply kill time, or

to obtain an electronic soap box. Don't get suckered into wasting too much of your time with these.

The US Government and businesses also run BBSs. These are less "gossipy" than hobbyist BBSs and have information that's more reliable for the most part. These come and go, with new ones being added all the time. The trick is finding the ones that will be of interest to you. Perhaps the best way to find these is to find the newest edition of *The BBS Bible* (available at many book stores or from Bubeck Publishing (215) 287-6356 for $30).

Once you've located a BBS, take a little care in trying to access it. Many company and government BBSs are designed to be accessed *only* by authorized personnel. If a warning comes up when you enter the BBS and key words are required to access it, sign off. If you start "hacking" trying to break their code, you'll attract attention, your phone call will be traced, and you'll be in hot water. Recent destruction of valuable information by hackers has not made these people too lenient toward people trying to break into their BBSs. A word to the wise.

Fortunately, many government and company BBSs are open to people doing research into the fields covered by the BBS. Therefore, if you write to the organization and explain what you're writing about and ask for access to their BBS, you'll often be allowed to use it. Be sure you do *not* give out any passwords or the like and don't abuse your privilege. Doing so will make it so all researchers — you included — will be forced out of this source of information in the near future.

If you exploit your modem a lot to access BBSs, your computer may contract a "virus." Computer viruses are programs or subprograms which remain inactive and do not interfere with computer functioning for some time. During this dormant period, they'll often replicate themselves into other computer programs and may thus be easily "spread" over a hard drive or from one disc to another as you use various discs in your computer system.

Some viruses simply replicate themselves and fill your discs and computer memory until you run out of room; this means you have to go through and get rid of the virus and all copies of it before your computer will function efficiently.

Other viruses are more destructive. Some are "bombs" that will keep track of the date on the computer clock or the number of duplications they've gone through; after a set number has been reached, the bomb goes from its passive, duplicating mode, into a more destructive procedure. At this point it may format discs, shuffle information, rename files, reconfigure the computer's keyboard, or whatever the virus was designed to do. As you can imagine, this pretty well trashes data, often losing it forever in the process.

There are no sure-fire ways to keep from picking up a virus. But there are several "tricks" you can use. These include not using your computer's time and date feature or simply resetting it to the same date from time to time to circumvent any time cues a virus may have; this won't keep a virus from replicating, but will keep a bomb from destroying your system. The second way is to avoid free or "share ware" programs from dubious sources such as BBSs with unlimited access.

If you do a lot of work with a modem, then it would be wise to run an anti-virus program. The first choice at the time of this writing is "Virus Scan" marketed by McAffee & Associates. This program usually costs $40 or less and is available at most computer stores or mail-order companies.

In addition to being useful for data searches, a modem can also be used to communicate with editors and publishers. The time demanded to transfer information over the phone is too slow to make transfer of whole book manuscripts or the like cost effective. But it is possible to transfer a few pages in just minutes. Thus, a modem can be useful for "rush" jobs such as a breaking news story or getting a rewritten page to an editor just ahead of a deadline. These occasions are generally pretty rare, however, since next-day delivery services can get a whole disc of information to an editor without tieing up phone lines.

If you decide you need a modem, you'll discover that there are a number of "baud rates." The baud rate has to do with the speed at which information is transferred. In general, if you'll be using your modem a lot, the faster the rate the better. Currently, 9600 baud is the highest rate readily available; the catch is that many BBSs and data banks don't operate at this speed, so the unit will switch to a lower speed and you've spent extra money for no good reason.

The "industrial standard" is currently 2400; this speed will get you by with most systems. Therefore, a modem at this speed may make more sense unless you're really going to be using it an awful lot of the time. Do get a "Hayes Compatible" modem, since this format has become the one used by most BBSs and data banks.

When you purchase a modem, you're only half-way home. Next you need a program to operate it. The pick of these programs is ProComm (from Datastorm Technologies, Inc., PO Box 1471, Columbia, MO 65205 (314) 449-9401). This system practically runs itself and can be run with a minimum of fuss. Furthermore, it's updated regularly so you can upgrade its performance without having to relearn a completely new system.

Much information is sent over the airwaves these days, including data sent by most news agencies and wire services. Interestingly, there are "PC/XT" compatible modules or complete computer systems that have receivers built into them allowing a user to pull data off the airwaves and read them. (Currently, most news agencies don't encode their wire service information being sent to various newspapers and radio station subscribers.)

In addition to receiving the ASCII codes used by most news agencies, some of these receivers will also decode and route to your computer Baudot, AMTOR, standard Morse code, and PK-232 encoded material as well as the Japanese Katakana and Russian Cyrillic

Morse codes. Needless to say, you can pick up a wealth of information from short wave systems or if you're in an area where shorter-range messages are being sent using any of these codes.

That means you can purchase one of these receivers, couple it to your computer, and have access to the "raw" reports coming off the wire. This information can then be stored on a hard drive and the "search" mode of a word processor program used to locate topics of interest.

For example, let's say you're researching an article about the "Greenhouse Effect." If you had one of these radio data receivers, you could "plug" in and store on hard drive a week's worth of information from a news service. Then you could retrieve the information with WordPerfect (which can sift through the ASCII format the information would be stored in) and use the word processor's search mode to find key words such as "greenhouse effect", "carbon dioxide", etc. This would allow you to quickly scan through reams of information and pull the chunks you require.

You couldn't employ the data word for word, since it's protected by copyright. But you could rewrite it and/or use the hard figures as background research in your writing projects. You'd also be able to discover companies involved in research or manufacturing products, what various government agencies were saying publicly or off the record, and other useful information.

One company that's currently offering radio data receiver modules that translate the data into computer ASCII files is HAL Communications Corp., 1201 West Kenyon Rd., PO Box 365, Urbana, IL 61801-0365,

(217) 367-7373. The company also offers "stand alone" IBM-compatible computer systems that have these modules built into them for minimal RF (Radio Frequency) interference from your computer. The modules and computer systems are not terribly expensive; the company's "PK-232" module for adding to a computer costs $416. If you need such information, such a system could be invaluable.

For a time, several companies were offering books on microfiches. A wide range of reference, military, and how-to books were offered for a few dollars each, making it possible to create a large library for a small amount of money. Best of all, a library of hundreds of books could be fit into a shoebox-sized container. The only catch was that a microfiche reader had to be purchased; but these could often be purchased second-hand from government agencies or businesses.

A friend of mine who runs a small publishing/research business made several good deals with a microfiche company several years back and — as a gift — gave me a library of several hundred reference books and a used library reader! These have proven to be a very useful gift in the years since then. And I managed to add a number of books to my microfiche library since then. The microfiches are easy to use. And it's even possible to trace drawings and photos off the large microfiche screen to have a basis for line illustrations for books and articles.

Unfortunately, microfiche books never caught on with the public. And it appears that computer technologies using CDs will make them obsolete. In the meantime, if you should stumble upon a cache of micro books and a reader, or if they should make a comeback, check one out. It might prove to be a good investment if the reference books are ones that you might be able to use.

The new technology that has the most promise of replacing microfiche books is the CD (Compact Disc). As mentioned earlier, this type of storage — if it becomes available — promises to cause a real information explosion and might be as profound an innovation as Gutenburg's press. In effect, you might be able to create a library that rivals a public library *and* can be accessed and information retrieved and used in a word processor format.

Hopefully the hardware and a wide range of discs will soon become available. If and when the technology becomes popular, there's no reason single CDs containing fifty to a hundred large books couldn't be marketed for the same price as today's pop CD recordings.

Of course, information doesn't have to be gleaned only via hi-tech gadgets. Books will undoubtedly continue to be important. Too, books are surprisingly easy to use: easily portable, non-electrical, and capable of being used in a wide range of lighting conditions.

The catch with books is that new ones are expensive. And they're more and more being aimed at mass audiences. Such books generally have little that's of use to an information writer. Consequently, most information writers find themselves ordering from specialty book catalogs or haunting used book stores.

Many writers discover "treasures" when haunting used book stores and scouting through technical and specialty book catalogs. Because the information covered by information writers isn't always of great interest to the public in its "raw" form, technical books are often short-lived and printed in small runs of only a few thousand books. Consequently, such books are rarely seen on book stands.

For those with the patience and time, checking out library fund-raising book sales, used book stores, and garage sales can enable a writer to build a reference library of off-beat books.

The catch is that you have to buy books as they're available and do without when you can't find what you want. Too, the information can be quite out of date in some areas — like physics, electronics, or computers.

Of course, information can also be gleaned by speaking to people face-to-face in personal interviews. But even here, you'll do well to take along a tape recorder in addition to your note pad and, perhaps, a camera. Tape recorders are essential for getting accurate quotes; be sure to explain this to the person you're interviewing and you'll be more apt to be allowed to record the conversation. The machine will make it easier for you to get your information accurate

and has the added benefit of shortening an interview since you'll not be pausing between questions trying to scribble down your notes.

It should be noted that, when someone you're interviewing tells you that something is "off-the-record" or otherwise notes that some tidbit is not for publication, you *must* treat it that way. If you publish something that was "off-the-record," the person who told you the information not only won't be apt to feed you more information, they may sue you. Furthermore, if they contact your publisher or others, you may discover you're practically blacklisted, with no one interested in handling your writing.

If you get "off-the-record" information, it is still valuable, however. It can steer you toward the truth. But always get conformation before going out on a limb. The person speaking "off-the-record" may actually be feeding you false information and making it so they can't be stuck in print with having given it to you. "Off-the-record" should set off warning bells in your head and cause you to be skeptical of what's being told you.

A camera is useful if you're doing an article about the person being interviewed. In such a case, pictures of the person will be useful for illustrations. Photos can also allow you to "inspect" what books he has in his library, how his desk is arranged, etc., by viewing the photos in detail at a later date. This information can be useful for putting "color" into the final article and will also sometimes give you some insight into what the person feels is important, what has shaped their opinions, and so forth.

The 35mm cameras covered in Chapter 2 are ideal for picture taking during an interview. Your portable

cassette recorder should be battery-operated (with brand new batteries!) with a built-in, automatic-gain-control microphone. And don't skimp on tape; get a quality cassette so it doesn't conk out before you can get your information off it.

Personal interviews can be expensive in terms of time and money if the person you're interviewing is far away from where you are. Fortunately, you can also conduct interviews over the phone. Often you'll even get *more* information, since the person you talk to will be more relaxed on the phone. (If you tape the conversation, be sure to get permission beforehand; not doing so is illegal.)

The big shortcoming with phone interviews is the lack of photos. With journal articles or books, this may not be too much of a problem. Family photos or, if the person is famous, publicity shots may also be available — be sure to check and offer to pay for the picture.

Another type of interview (which I've never seen described anywhere) is the "written interview." This consists of a letter of questions which you create, leaving space for handwritten replies to each question. This is mailed to the person to be "interviewed" along with a stamped return envelope. The interviewee fills out his answers to the questions and mails it back to you.

The catch to this is that you have to do some other background material on the person you interview or lift information from some of your questions to create background material and an introduction. But the end result often gives a better picture of the person you interview, since he has time to think out his answers to your questions. (If you save your questions on your word processor, your article will be about one fourth

done, since you'll not have to retype the questions for the final article.)

Finally, the TV can be a source of information. The "Discovery Channel" and PBS, along with many news and science programs, offer a wealth of information. If you use these, it's wise to purchase a VCR to capture the information so you can review it if you miss anything. TV tends to be fast-paced; a freeze-frame feature is essential to glean details that are impossible to see during the fast pace of most shows.

Be prepared to get information from a wide range of sources. The more you have at your disposal, the easier your research will be and the more quickly you can get it done.

• 5 •

The Basic Techniques of Information Writing

Some sage once said that the hardest thing about writing is writing. That sounds flippant — unless you've had to write professionally. Then you realize how true this is. Because until you put words onto paper (or, recently, into a word processor), you have nothing to show for your work and nothing to work with. You need something to hone into a finished product.

So this is always the first step of writing: getting those words cranked out. The secret is to write like crazy. You don't worry about whether your spelling, punctuation, or syntax is correct. You can make it correct later. The important thing is to start writing and get something, no matter how crude, to work with.

Force yourself to get into your chair, power up the computer, and write. If you're concerned about fixing the leaking faucet, yard work, or other busy work as a freelancer, or office gossip and politics, opening mail, or other odds and ends if you work at a business, you'll get little writing done. Instead, shut out the world and write. That's the only way you'll ever get any real writing done and the only way you'll ever make any money at it.

The guys that sit around thinking of the careful wording they need to use, hatching the perfect outline, or trying to get it right with the first draft are *never* going to be much good as writers.

Of course, no matter what kind of a ball of fire you are at the keyboard, you'll occasionally have trouble beginning, or become tired of writing. Names for this condition vary from profession to profession. In other lines of work, it's known as "burn out" or "mid-life crisis". With writers, it's generally called writer's block. (Those less generous souls call it laziness.)

Writer's block can be serious.

Otherwise fine writers have suffered for years without being able to get anything produced. If you want to be a suffering artist, this isn't too bad. If you're trying to make a decent living writing, it's disastrous.

Fortunately, modern psychology as well as writers talking to writers, have been able to develop solutions to the problem of writer's block. If you follow the advice given above and simply "write like crazy," you'll often discover you don't have time for writer's block. And once you commence writing, writer's block typically vanishes.

Some creative people have manic-depressive tendencies. Not a lot is known about this mental affliction, but it can make those suffering from it euphoric for a time and then severely depressed at other times.

For a time it was assumed that manic-depressive people had nothing wrong with them physically. Rather, manic-depression was seen as an emotional problem. But recent studies suggest the condition is hereditary with many writers seeming to suffer from it.

If you have profound bouts of manic-depression, you should get professional help from a psychiatrist or psychologist. In the past, writers feared that getting such help would destroy their creativity. In fact, it usually helps a writer produce more quality writing.

Of course, the act of writing is almost like asking to be a manic-depressive. A writer will go for stretches without work and suddenly will hit it big (to him at least) with a contract, magazine article, or whatever. Instant celebration. Then the new sensation wears off in a day or two, any money that comes in is quickly spent paying bills, and it's back to trying to sell another article to pay the bills. Writing is full of these ups and downs.

Perhaps the worst "downer" comes in finishing a long writing project. In such a case, you carefully polish and write and work for weeks or months. The manuscript is finally printed and dropped into the mailbox.

And nothing happens.

No one pats you on the back to congratulate you. Chances are you'll not hear from your editor or boss for some time — perhaps not at all.

If the project comes back for reworking — depression. If it doesn't, there's no reward for a long time. When the advance check or other payment finally comes, you're rocketed to the top of your emotional roller coaster. That wears off.

Then the book or article gets into print. Up you go again. Then down...

You get the picture.

One way around this is to set daily goals. Decide to produce ten to twenty pages of "rough" draft or an equal number of pages rewritten and polished. If you meet that goal, discontinue your work for the day. After a week of meeting your page output requirement (or even if you meet it one day if you're feeling down), give yourself a small reward. Perhaps a rented video of a movie, a few hours listening to a favorite record, time just sitting on the back porch or taking a walk. Use these rewards to keep yourself going. And when that manuscript gets into the mail, take your spouse out to dinner or throw a party. Do something — it will improve your writing and keep you at it. (Writers can reward themselves with food. But this isn't wise, since being overweight is a hazard of the profession due to lack of exercise. It's better to use a reward other than food.)

An added plus of getting into the habit of producing a set number of pages of manuscript per day, is that you can calculate how long it'll take you to finish a writing project. This can help you schedule your work and be able to meet deadlines.

Technical writing can be slow, especially when you have to look stuff up all the time (like just how much a widget weighs or the number of windows a UH-60A

helicopter has on its right side). Such work gets tedious and you can spend hours finding the information to just write a few paragraphs. In such a case, don't be afraid to take frequent breaks to let your brain unstew.

Recent studies have shown that those working at word processors have *greater* output if they take a ten minute break every hour. So do yourself — and your writing — a favor. Your productivity will increase as your mind and eyes get a rest.

Many writers find that varying writing tasks helps them avoid writer's block. Some writers find working on several books or other major projects at once increases their output and helps them avoid depression when a project is finally finished. Related work such as editing, teaching, laying out a newsletter, or the like may also help clear the cobwebs from the far corners of your brain.

Having a number of projects going at once can also get a little hectic. But writers seem to work better with such pressure. The main thing is to gauge how much you can handle without making it hurt, rather than help, your writing efforts. Keep your work load manageable. (A computer word processor program coupled with a hard drive that allows you to cram your different ventures on for ready access when you wish to switch from one to the next are big helps here.)

Even if you're only laboring on one project at a time, you should remember that writing is not just one task. Some writers find that embarking into the daily routine by reviewing and reworking material they created in a rough draft the day before prevents tendencies toward writer's block. Once they get started with corrections, it's then easy to switch over to con-

tinuing the rough draft. There is a wide range of work you can do to "get started in the morning." You can rewrite material, proof it, check spelling, contact potential publishers, do research, and so forth, until you're up to doing creative, "rough draft" work. Writing isn't just a single task — and that's what keeps it so interesting for most authors.

Other writers like to quit in the middle of an idea or paragraph rather than completing a chapter, article, or whatever they've been working on. The next day, they return to the word processor and know exactly what they're going to write. They sit down and are propelled into the next project, chapter, or whatever, without thinking about it.

Finally, some writers are either day or night people. Due to how your brain is wired, you may function better late at night or, conversely, very early in the morning. If you're freelance, you can take advantage of this by working during the period when you're at your best. (If you're not freelance, that's one of the tough parts of being a nine-to-fiver.)

How many hours per day should you work on writing?

You'll probably discover that this varies from one day to the next. If you freelance from your home, you will recurrently work in short periods, thanks to baby sitting on the side, telephone interruptions by publishers, editors, and salesmen, and so forth. This can be a plus, since you'll discover that your brain is frequently chugging away on writing problems while you're away from your word processor apparently working at something else. Writing isn't a nine-to-five business even if you're *not* a freelance author. While you may only be "writing" at your word processor for a set

period, you'll realize that you're *working* on writing projects almost every waking moment and sometimes in your sleep. Ideas can pop in, in the middle of a dream, when passing the time of day in seemingly idle conversation, while driving down the road, or whatever. Once your brain gets geared to this creative process it goes full tilt all the time. (In a sense, you will often be able to say that you work 24 hours a day on your writing.)

All that said, most writers engage in the actual process of writing only 4 to 6 hours a day (with an occasional two to four days averaging 8-10 hours to stay within a deadline). But they also spend much time researching articles, reading, and "office house keeping" by shuffling papers and so forth.

Anyway... the bottom line to preventing writer's block is to write. The hard thing about writing is writing.

All right. But where does an information writer get project ideas?

Well, if you're writing for a business, the ideas will routinely be handed to you. Unfortunately, these ideas tend to be half-baked. Non-writers often feed you these "good ideas" that aren't worth a nickel (usually because they were excellent — ten years ago). If the "good idea" comes from your boss or employer, much of your creative endeavor will be devoted to modifying the idea into something workable. So the first rule is, if you're *lucky* enough to get "good ideas" from friends, you can just smile, mutter something noncommittal, and wander on.

If you're a freelancer, things can be quite different. Then you need to generate your own ideas for magazine articles or books that a publisher will be interested in handling and which stand a chance of selling.

Novices spend excessive amounts of time trying to come up with an original subject to write about. That's not how the "pros" do it.

Here's the shocker: when it comes down to it, most writers (as well as those working in the arts) plagiarize. No, they don't copy word for word — that would break the law. But they do borrow other peoples' ideas. The artistry comes in making the idea belong to the (latest) writer by getting a different slant on the story or combining it with other ideas. Writing teachers in their ivory towers and beginning writers are usually appalled at such suggestions. But that's how things get done in the real world, if you want to make a living at information writing.

If we can digress from writing a moment and go to music, we can see excellent examples of just how this technique works. For example, J.S. Bach is generally considered to have been one of the most creative composers that ever existed. And yet, he used a Baroque process called "alliteration" to create many of his most famous pieces.

Alliteration is the polite term for plagiarizing.

Here's how it worked for Bach or other musicians. The composer would take a musical composition by himself or, more commonly, someone else. He'd then go through it changing the piece — sometimes measure by measure or note by note — into a "new" composition.

When you hear the original and the composer's alliteration of it performed, you'll often note that they're similar. But usually, you can't tell they're alike unless you're used to noting key changes and rhythm patterns. Only when you take out the two manuscripts and compare their structure does the "copying" appear.

The best in literature have also been guilty of borrowing ideas. Shakespeare's plots weren't new. What makes his plays go on and on (beyond their usefulness, perhaps) is what he did with other people's ideas. He reworked old ideas to create something that was worthwhile and (if the theories about someone else writing his work are unfounded!) all his own.

Hollywood is notorious for its slavish copying and poetry ideas are regularly borrowed by one poet from another. Many successful novels are "spin offs" of another original — though it's harder to spot this in prose writing than it is in the movies and music.

Needless to say, the same thing is done in information writing. You collect ideas and information from other writers and rework it into your own articles. If you're a talented writer, the finished piece may be — just as with Bach and Shakespeare — better than the original.

Forget the idea that creativity "happens in a vacuum." That's false 98 percent of the time. All the arts build on their past and upon the culture they're in. The same is true with writing and especially true of "mundane" information writing.

The key is not the originality of the idea or form. It's what is done within the confines of that form. You can

rework the mediocre or broaden an idea so it becomes greater than the original.

Of course, you don't copy things or ideas word for word, and — in information writing — you generally have several sources of data. And you must always rework your sources so the original author can't even recognize the basic idea. That's how you'll do most of your writing projects.

In order to feed your mind with other peoples' ideas, you'll need to amass the proper books and magazines in the field you're interested in. Occasionally, this can be done by visiting a library. More often, you'll find what you need only by subscribing to pertinent magazines, newspapers, journals, and newsletters.

Book catalogs can also show you what has — and hasn't — been done. Again, beginners usually try to find a project idea that no one else has covered. Unfortunately, these writers chronically end up with an ingenious tome that publishers don't want to buy. Actually, the way to sell a book or magazine idea is to copy what seems to be popular! Provided the market has not been saturated, the public will be ready to binge on the subject and publishers will be searching for additional manuscripts on the subject. The secret to getting the publisher interested in *your* idea is to have a slightly different slant on the subject.

In addition to having an idea that sells, it's important to have a subject *you* are interested in writing about. As you work on various writing projects, you'll likely discover subjects that interest you more than others. If the area of writing continues to interest you, by all means try to land as many writing projects as you can handle in this area. As you learn more about a field, gather reference materials, and add to your

hard drive facts-and-figures in the way of past writing projects and notes, you'll be on your way to becoming an "expert" on that subject. "Expert" is a loaded term. In reality, it means anyone who knows a lot about a subject. There's no big deal to being an expert. But the word has taken on a sort of "super star" status in some fields. A word to the wise: let other people call you an expert. Don't get caught referring to yourself as an expert.

Once you carve a niche in your area of "expertise", readers will seek other books you've written and publishers may ask you to write for them. This whole process will gradually snowball with people in the industry or area you're covering recognizing your name and feeding you information. At this point, you'll start having inside information and your articles will be of greater interest to your readers.

Best of all, becoming an expert in one or more fields will minimize your research time and expenses. Your knowledge, data stored in your computer, and your "private reference library" of magazines and books will be useful for similar writing projects. (Of course, you don't want to limit yourself too much. If interest in a subject area drops, you don't want to be limited to that niche. So whenever possible, try to become an "expert" in several fields rather than one.)

Another plus of becoming an "expert" is in your greater ability to obtain samples from companies whose products you may be covering. Computer software, electronic equipment, cameras, or whatever you write about, may be available on loan from various

companies (the practice varies according to what publishers you write for, the cost of the product, and how easy it is to ship).

Obtaining samples is much like landing writing projects. You collect magazines and check ads, seeing what's available in the area you'll be writing about. You collect the company name and address, then write a letter describing the articles you've already got in print and the project you're working on that will include their product. To get a company to help you out with sample products, you *must* have a contract (or at least a go-ahead from a magazine editor). This will allow you to give your editor's name and address so manufacturers can double-check with your "boss" to be sure you're a legitimate writer. (In the past, "writers" have received sample projects and then never got their articles in print. This has stained the reputation of authors in general and made it hard for legitimate authors to get sample products. Therefore, you'll need to have a contact in the publishing business.)

You have to be careful with sample products. Products like computer software, books, or VCR movies aren't in danger of being "doctored" so they will appear better or function more reliably than the product being sold to the public. But with mechanical things, this isn't the case. A car or gun, for example, might be reworked by a skilled mechanic or gunsmith so it functions flawlessly. An author receiving such a "ringer" will write a glowing report of how well it works. Readers run out and buy this super product and find the quality control on the assembly line is so poor the little jewel won't even operate as it comes from the box! (Don't laugh, this has happened more often than one likes to admit.)

The solution to this problem is to have access to other users of such equipment and, if possible, purchase "off the shelf" examples of the product to test with your sample. This will enable the writer to detect flaws that may not show in the sample product.

Most manufacturers will expect you to return the sample. Others will let you keep it. If you're allowed to keep the sample, it's best to hang onto it; often you'll need the sample for photos in subsequent articles or in other areas of your writing.

Occasionally you may end up with several samples that you can't use. In such a case, you may be able to turn around and sell or trade these. Whenever possible, trade these for something similar that you can use to write another article about.

Trading a business sample for another you'll write about is not a taxable transaction. But if you do sell the sample, be sure to keep careful records, since this will amount to income that must be reported on your income tax. (Writers are among the groups that are habitually audited. Be sure to keep careful records of everything and don't be tempted to cheat on reporting on income from writing. If you want to dodge taxes, writing isn't the field to be in.)

Occasionally a manufacturer will send out a sample product that's a dog. If you're going to have a less than favorable report, it's wise to return the sample, even if it was given to you, and explain what the problems were. Many manufacturers are responsive to a writer's ideas and will improve their products down the road.

With this in mind, some writers do *not* give bad reviews of products. The argument goes like this: You don't want to pan the product if it will be improved in

the future *and* there are already many quality products that should be reviewed. Therefore, writing is limited to mentioning the best products. There's merit to this route and it should be considered.

On the flip side is the corrupting influence of samples. The tendency is to be prejudiced and to give an extra edge to "freebies" over competition from companies who haven't been generous in sending you a sample. Chances are, you'll not be able to be completely impartial. But you should be as objective as possible. If you have trouble doing this, then you shouldn't ask for samples; it's better to borrow products from friends or spend money in purchasing them than to lose your reputation for impartiality.

One final pitfall to sample products. Sometimes, a friend or business acquaintance will offer to help you with your research. This sounds innocent enough. What happens is they contact a manufacturer and ask them to send out a sample product because your "friend" is helping you write an article. Then your "helper" keeps the product and — most often — the manufacturer blames you for not getting the information into the article, your friend's damage of the sample, or not returning the sample if it was only a loaner.

Needless to say, such "help" creates a mess. Be sure you always work only with people you trust. And always contact the manufacturer at once to let them know that a "friend" does not represent you if this hoax is being pulled on you and a manufacturer. (You may think such an occurrence is not apt to happen. I've had such "assistants" twice in the last ten years, both times with disastrous results.)

OK. Now that we've gone through a few of the ins and outs of writing, let's get down to the nitty gritty of producing an article, book, or manual.

• 6 •

The Tasks of Writing

Let's assume that you have your office set up, have a book or article idea in hand, have your reference materials located, and have sent your proposals, outlines, and whatnot and now have a request for sample chapters or a finished manuscript. How do you go about producing it?

We've gone over the tricks of getting started: you sit in your chair and start writing like crazy, then go back and straighten everything out later, correcting punctuation, spelling, and so forth. This ought to get you past writer's block.

When working on the final draft that will be submitted to an editor, you need to have it in its proper form. That means you need to double-space your manuscript, set the margins so there's ¾ inch to an inch of space around the sides, and start each chapter with a new page. The title page of your book should have your name, address, and phone number so the editor can get in touch in a hurry if he needs to.

The first chapter, introduction, or whatever should be started about halfway down the page and subsequent chapters should have a little extra room at the top of the page so your editor can write notes on it if he wishes to.

Use your word processor to add a "header or footer" to each page. This header or footer will contain your name or the article name if you're submitting more than one manuscript to the editor. Set your word processor to add the page number to each sheet of paper (and be sure the page number and header or footer don't try to occupy the same space!).

Each publisher has his own method of doing things. You can save trouble for all parties involved if you write your final draft in the basic format that your publisher will be using. The quirks of your publisher's style will be outlined in its "style sheet." If you haven't received one, ask for it. If they don't have one, ask in what form your manuscript is best submitted. (This is especially important if you have footnotes or other attributed material.)

If you're a little weak in the rules-of-grammar department, it wouldn't hurt to invest in a copy of *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White (available in most book stores or from Macmillan Publishing Company, 866 Third Ave., New York, NY

10022 — save money and get the paperback edition). Once you have it, study it carefully — the information doesn't sink in by osmosis.

Remembering that time is money, you must always get your writing completed in a minimum amount of time. Fortunately, with information writing, it's possible to write without the characterization and details needed in fiction writing. You can most often simply say "desk" without having to describe it in detail. (The exception to this is when you're writing about a person in an interview or biography. Then you might want to add details to characterize the person you're describing. For example, instead of "desk" you might elaborate with "his cluttered desk looked as if it had been rescued from the dumpster behind a second-hand store.")

One way of speeding writing is to minimize note taking when researching a project. Let me back up a moment and review the "traditional" method of taking notes that's taught in school (or, at least, was taught the last time I checked).

Here it is: you go through various reference sources, take notes on note cards, and then carefully arrange the notes into order, perhaps making an outline as you go along. The article is then written from these note cards.

The catch to this is that you practically write your article three times, once in bits and pieces on the note cards, again in your outline, and a final time for the rough draft of your article.

As we've seen, it's practical to write the final draft on a word processor, perhaps even expanding the outline to become the article, little by little. But it's feasible to save more time with the computer.

The secret is to skip the note taking process. Or, if you wish, turn the notes into the final draft, by taking notes on the word processor rather than on note cards (and slowly writing the cards by hand).

What about the note card shuffling to get everything into place?

As anyone who's labored with a word processor for long knows, it's super easy to jump from one point to another in a document, adding something here, dropping back to delete something, then galloping forward... until everything is in its place.

So you implement this skip-around tactic to type in your notes as you go along, putting them into order little by little. And, as with note cards, if you decide that a paragraph is in the wrong place, it's simple to use a "block move" to reposition it into its logical spot.

The catch is getting the reference material to the vicinity of your word processor. Usually this isn't hard if you own your reference materials or can check them out of a library. Those who depend on a public or university library that won't allow reference materials to be checked out may wish to invest in a laptop computer to carry the mountain to what's-his-face; then your "notes" can be taken in the library. And, on the rare occasions that you can't get your word processor and reference materials together, you can still scribble a few notes. But the fewer, the better.

Of course, this can create quite a confusion of books, magazines, and other materials when you launch into

a large writing project. The main thing to remember is that neatness only counts on your finished draft. Having stacks of books and papers around your desk and chair doesn't make any difference as long as you don't forget to include one of your sources of information.

(To avoid accidentally omitting anything, I often create a big "finished" stack. This consists of books and magazines I've looted information from. This also gives me a visual reference of how much work is left to go through and how far I've progressed. For really complex reports or books, it's possible to create piles of reference materials representing each chapter of your manuscript. If a reference source will be used in several different chapters, place it in the first "chapter pile" it will appear in. After it's been used for that chapter, move it into its subsequent pile.)

This may sound complicated, but in practice it's quite fast and can cut writing projects in half. In effect, such a reduction will increase your productivity by one hundred percent. Coupled with the other savings in time offered by a word processor, many professional writers have discovered that if their BWP (Before Word Processing) time to produce a book was running around a year, then their AWP (After Word Processing) time for the same type and length of project drops to about a month!

Another thing that people learn in school is to write in a dry style that displays the writer's virtuosity in spewing impressive phrases and words. This teaching is compounded by professions and lines

of learning that are loaded with jargon. By the time a person gets through a university's Master or Doctoral program, he'll often have perfected enough skill to keep anyone outside his profession from ever wanting to read what he writes. Examples of such writing fill professional journals and magazines. It's rarely read by anyone other than those who are intent on gleaning information from it.

As an information writer, you need to adopt the opposite tack. You need to write with such clarity that nearly *anyone* who is smart enough to understand what you're writing about won't be thrown off by scientific or professional jargon he hasn't had the need to learn. Additionally, you need to smooth his way and make your writing enjoyable for him to read. People teaching in a University need only be published in non-paying journals to show their name in print and avoid the "publish or perish" sword of Damocles that hangs over their heads.

You need to publish *and* get paid — or perish. You can't afford to write in intellectual journals where jargon and obscure writing is encouraged (and no one is paid for their obtuse contributions). You need to write articles that sell and will leave editors and readers wanting more.

This isn't prostitution of your writing skills. You'll still be getting the facts to the public. In fact, you'll reach more people because they'll enjoy reading what you write. Making things enjoyable doesn't mean watering them down or lowering your standards. If anything, it means raising your standards by forcing yourself to write clearly, rather than copping out with intellectual cliches.

The closer you can write to the way people talk, the better. One of the big shortcomings of some information writing, especially in manuals and company brochures, is how stilted it can be. If you can get away with it, consider using contractions (as has been done throughout this book). These make people feel "at home" reading your material. For example, "It is easy to see..." doesn't flow nearly as well as, "It's easy to see..." (I personally use "that's," "there's," and "it's" instead of "that/there/it is;" but you'll have to decide for yourself how far you want to take this.)

At the opposite extreme of things, you need to go out of your way to avoid colloquial phrases or "abused" words. For example, use "awake" rather than "get up," "leave" rather than "go out," and so forth.

I've discovered a list of words that I continually abuse in my writing. I've made up — oops, that should be "made" without the "up" — a computer file that I pull during the polishing of my final draft. I use my word processor's search mode to locate these abused words. For what it's worth, here's the list: just, again, all, as, back, could, would, up, out, down, end, into, while, look, some, small, several, seem, quick, over, made, on, off, only, ready, and take. Chances are, you'll have a different set. Use a style checker word frequency checker to discover words that appear again and again.

How informally you write will also vary according to the style of the magazine or publication you're working for. This book has been written as if I were talking to you (the reader). Think how different the overall tone would be if, instead of saying "you," I wrote "the reader," or "one can do this" rather than "you can do

this," and so forth. Along the same lines, this whole book would have a different tone if, instead of referring to myself as "I", I wrote "the author." Decide how close you want to be to the reader and don't depart from the formal style used by your publisher.

In general, journals and some professional magazines try to be very formal, while how-to articles will be very informal with the writing being more of a monologue written to an intimate friend. But check before you write; the difference could decide whether or not a publisher is going to print what you write.

Unless you're writing a joke book, you probably won't be intending to incorporate much humor into your style. But the most serious of articles can sometimes be propelled along by a mildly humorous story.

For example, a civil defense journal once carried an article about how people react to the aftermath of serious weather damage like tornadoes or hurricanes. At one point, the author told of people who reacted irrationally to nearly total damage to their homes by going outdoors and raking the lawn. The image of these poor people whose houses are totally wrecked standing in the front yard trimming the hedge or getting the leaves off the grass is both tragic and humorous. *And* that writer made an impression that will stick with me forever.

The amount of humor or — in the above example — how dry or "black" it should be is up to you. Try to do what you're comfortable with and do *not* try to employ it if it might be offensive or if you normally have trouble telling a joke. Humor has to be just right or it doesn't succeed.

For most long writing projects, and some complicated short ones, you'll need to make transitions from one idea to the next to keep your finished project smooth and flowing to the reader. There are eight good tricks you can use to do this.

One is to repeat the main point or idea of one paragraph in the next. This can be done by breaking longer paragraphs into smaller ones. But more often you'll have to expand your material slightly.

A second method is to repeat key words or pronouns from a previous paragraph. "All writers should remember..." in paragraph one; "Many writers feel..." in paragraph two; and "Of course writers can't always..." in paragraph three, for example.

The third means is to use a question to lead into the new point and paragraph. "But what should you do?" will lead into a new section dealing with specifics after you've generalized in an article. This can be most effective if you can manipulate elements from a previous paragraph to form your question.

A fourth way is to employ the connecting words: now, then, soon, someday, yesterday, tomorrow, forever, meanwhile, afterward, across, against, above, below, beyond, nearby, before, after, next, following, again, first, second, third, finally, likewise, otherwise, consequently, although, also, however, but, nevertheless, or therefore. This tactic is used throughout this book. The catch is that you have to be careful not to employ these words too often. They can cause your writing to sound stilted if you're not careful.

A fifth method can be borrowed from fiction writers. They use a time-related or transitional phrase to move things along. These are often fashioned with the

connecting words listed above. Examples: "Just then...;" "After a few hours...;" "When they arrive...;" "The following day...;" "After a while...;" "By the time...;" etc.

There are other transitional phrases more suitable for non-fiction writing. Among these are: "in addition to;" "for instance;" "for example;" "let's suppose;" "as a result;" "in fact;" "this isn't the only reason;" "on the other hand" (employ this once in a group since people only have two hands); "despite that;" "on the contrary;" or "there's another side to the problem."

A sixth method is to use a summation of what's coming next. This "crystal ball" transition transports the reader into the new idea. "There's no doubt that one of the great doctors of the 20th Century was...;" "But this wasn't the only thing going on that year..."

A seventh is to exploit subheadings after the main title or chapter heading to break a piece into logical sections. This is cheating a bit, but it works well with some material, especially when it is very diverse. This also allows you to create a "catch all" chapter in a tome, if you have a lot of details that don't seem to fit together gracefully by any other method.

The eighth way is to use number or letter designations — as was done in this section listing the eight methods of achieving smooth transitions. As you can see, this lends itself to more formal writing but can be made to fit in something like this book as well.

One trick that helps ease things into place with this method is to write all the points, then go back in your manuscript and add how many there are. This, too, was done here. The "There are eight good tricks you can use to do this" that introduced this section was

added *after* I wrote everything and found that there were a total of eight ways.

Regardless of what you use (note the transitional phrase there), don't exploit them too often. They can become tiring. If you've arranged your material in a logical fashion, transitions may not be needed very often. If you find yourself using excessive numbers of transitions, try to move sections into a more sensible order to avoid having to overdo them.

Fiction writers say that their first chapter sells the book and their last chapter sells their next novel. The same is true in information writing. You need to make the introduction to an article, or the first chapter of your book, interesting enough for the reader to keep reading.

This can be done several ways. In fact, a few articles will start with a short story (often fictional). This story shows why the reader needs to know what's in the article. Provided you don't overuse this technique, it can be quite effective.

Most authors require a couple of paragraphs to get "wound up" when starting an article or chapter. Often deleting the first sentences or paragraphs will improve what you've written. Try seeing how much you can delete from the beginning of your first draft.

Unfortunately, one of the toughest things in getting writing to "flow" well is cutting the "gems" that you've labored hard to create. Almost always, these will be cute or brilliant phrases that really strike your fancy or show how clever you are.

And don't belong in the final draft.

Learning to swallow your pride and cut these is important. Think of yourself as a surgeon hacking away bits of cancer; cut enough, and you'll save your manuscript's life. (This last sentence is one of those I'm hoping you'd have the sense to cut. It's been left in to illustrate the point.)

Varying the length of sentences makes a manuscript considerably more interesting to read. Unfortunately, many teachers as well as style-checker programs tend to look at long sentences as *always* needing to be broken into shorter pieces. In fact, you'd do well to strive for a mix of sentence structures. Some ought to be short. Others, occasionally ramble along almost endlessly. Compound sentences, prepositional phrases, and other such "stuff" add spice.

Punctuation should occasionally include exclamation and question marks; they also add spice. A good manuscript will look interesting even if it isn't being read.

Anecdotes can be useful. These, of course, make your point or show why things happen the manner they do. An article about why helicopters are the only type of aircraft used to any great extent by the Army, for example, would have a lot of interest and insight added to it if you told how, when the Air Force became a separate entity from the US Army, the Army had to agree never to operate fixed-wing aircraft in combat. This could then enable the reader to understand why helicopters might be used not so much because they're ideal, but because they're the only option available to the Army.

Dialogue can be exploited. Occasionally it can even be fiction *provided* you write something like, "It's easy to imagine the conversation that must have taken place..." and then dive into your dialogue. Just be sure you really portray what must have been said (unless you're writing tongue-in-cheek).

Of course, you need to be careful that you don't create dialogue that might get you sued. For example, you don't want your imaginary dialogue to suggest that two company officials were plotting to defraud the public with defective products or some such thing.

If you've taped an interview or have been taking careful notes, you can write the actual dialogue. Again, care needs to be exercised. And always save your tapes and notes in case the person being quoted claims that you've put words into their mouth. With especially damaging dialogue, you should *always* have a taped copy of the conversation *and* duplicate it so you won't be in hot water if you lose the original.

It's possible to "set the scene" in a non-fiction article as easily as it is with a novel. Describing the setting of a story, its sounds and smells, or whatever, will make it seem more real to the reader. As with good fiction, the secret is to give sharp details on only a few things; strangely enough, this will cause the reader to feel that everything has been described in detail, though it hasn't been. This is considerably less boring than a lenghthy itemized account would be.

Use vivid description. Suppose a person being described in an article is tall. Simply saying he's tall doesn't tell the reader much. But if you write that he "towers over those around him," you've given the reader a precise mental picture.

Likewise, if you are reporting on work conditions that are tense, it's preferable to describe the nervous gestures of employees, their tics, and other signs of strain, instead of saying, "Everyone looked tense." Describing what's going on makes your writing sound less subjective. You give the facts, allowing the reader to come to the same conclusions you have.

It's wise to "understate" things, not overstate them. Nothing ruins a good story (or, at least, turns it into a "tall tale") faster than exaggeration. Don't be tempted to say something is the biggest, best, or whatever — even if it is. Don't describe how big, good, or whatever it is; let the reader draw his own conclusions. Today's readers are already bombarded by "bigger and better" products through advertising. The less of this in your writing, the more credible it'll seem to a reader.

Knowing what audience you'll be writing for is important and ought to be kept in mind. Imagine you're writing about why the US Air Force discontinued its investigation into whether or not UFOs were alien space ships. You'd adopt a different slant if you were writing for *The Skeptical Inquirer*, where most readers already are convinced that UFOs are hoaxes, than you would for *Omni*, where readers may be hopeful that there is life on other planets. Your conclusion that UFOs are not genuine might be the same in both articles. But the *Omni* article would need to have a bit less harshness to it and might also speculate that someday a real flying saucer might be seen. If you're writing for a magazine where the readers are familiar with how a computer functions,

you can do away with many of your explanations of the more common aspects of computer operation. Conversely, if you are writing for a group of people who are "computer illiterates," you need to explain each step of the way. Failure to write toward your audience will either insult them or lose them almost from the first.

Sometimes, you'll be writing for a very broad audience. Then you'll need to explain everything down to whatever level seems likely to be the "minimal" knowledge for most readers. One technique to keep from insulting the more erudite readers is to start with a phrase such as "most readers know," before your basic explanations.

Once you've "admitted" that you recognize some readers will already understand the more elementary explanations, you can dispense with such introductory phrases. The more knowledgeable reader will no longer feel that you're talking down to him.

To keep the knowledgeable reader as well as the "beginner" interested in what you're writing, articles aimed at "general" audiences should have information that will challenge almost everyone who will be reading what you write. Of course, this isn't always possible. But whenever practical, try to get facts or stories into your article that haven't appeared elsewhere.

After you've got your rough draft finished, it's time to go through and carefully rewrite it. If you rewrite, rewrite, and rewrite, you can't help but produce a more readable article. Always get things polished until they are as close to perfect as you can

achieve. This is one thing that separates the writers from the mice (to murder a cliche).

Rewriting means you'll be sending quality stuff to editors. Don't slack off after that first draft. The real labor is yet to come.

One of the secrets of this "polishing" is to read your first draft as if it's the first time *you* are reading it. Check that it's easy to understand who or what the "they," "he," or "it" actually is.

Check to see that all your phrases are in the right spot. Don't be guilty of writing in the confusing style of many of today's journalists. For example, "the dog eats anything and loves children;" does the dog really love to eat children? And "the shot was reported by an unidentified driver on Bay Street" doesn't convey its message as clearly as "an unidentified driver reported shots being fired on Bay Street."

Remember, too, that the English language can be very ambiguous, even when used properly.

The old "limbless lady killer" story is a good example of this. As it progresses, the listener discovers that everyone has a different idea of who or what the limbless lady killer is. The criminal can be a limbless killer who murders ladies; a limbless lady who is a murderer; or a murderer who only kills limbless ladies. Invariably take time to tack down exactly what *you* mean so your reader doesn't have to guess.

Another thing to watch for is a repeated word in the same sentence. The sentence, "An automobile driver has a love affair with his automobile," sounds inferior to "an automobile driver has a love affair with his car." The same information is in both versions, but the last

is more enjoyable to the reader, since "automobile" isn't repeated.

Don't sound too sure of yourself or cause things to sound too pat. The sentence above, for example, sounds less dogmatic if you write, "Many a driver has a love affair with his car" or "A driver can have a love affair with his car."

Whenever feasible, avoid plurals in sentences, as these can confuse the reader. "Many a driver has a love affair with his car" is clearer than "many drivers have love affairs with their cars." When the plurals are added, we're not sure if several drivers have joint ownership of the cars, have more than one car, or what. Don't assume that your reader will be able to sort it out. Get it as clear as you can and, if there's any room for doubt, explain things fully.

Another important thing to do when you're polishing your draft is to get the work into the length needed by the publication. It's a sad fact, but most editors don't have time to do much editing these days. Editors have minimal staffs and are under pressure to produce in a hurry while spending a minimum of money. They're concerned about keeping the project within budget, getting readers to buy the publication on the newsstand, and in-house politics.

Don't expect an editor to do more than correct a few typos that got past you. If you send in a manuscript that needs to be cut to the proper number of words, has a lot of grammar errors, or is in need of any type of re-working, it's going to be rejected. There are plenty of writers these days and the editor doesn't have time to do major edits of your work. He's not mad at you, he isn't out to get you, he isn't going to steal your idea.

He doesn't have the time to accept anything other than manuscripts that are nearly ready for the typesetter.

Obtaining this near perfection in your articles will demand less and less time as you become a more talented writer. This is because you'll gradually learn to do much of your rough draft correctly the first go around. Too, style and spelling checkers will actually help improve your writing, since you'll have your nose rubbed in your mistakes and be called upon to change them when using either of these programs. (Critics of word processors thought these gadgets would ruin writers; in fact they improve writing!) Once you've got the hang of writing, you'll need less time for polishing rough drafts.

The publishing business is moving at a faster and faster pace. In fact, the day when writers check, edit, proof their manuscript, lay it out, print it on a laser printer in the magazine's format, and send a *camera-ready* copy of an article to the publisher is fast approaching. Get used to proof reading and editing your articles. Chances are good you'll be doing it the rest of your career.

There is money to be made writing unsolicited articles and sending them to magazines. If you try this, your article will often be rejected, no matter how well done it is. But even if what you submit is rejected, if it's well done, the editor will be more apt to remember you next time you send something for consideration. He may actually send work your way in a letter saying, "Hey, I can't use this, but could you give me an article (or book) on...?"

Always try to find another publisher for anything that's been rejected. Often it takes years to get something into print. But if it is well done, you'll often be able to find someone willing to buy it.

If you've sent an article everywhere and no one's interested in it, keep the manuscript *and* the computer disc copy. Often you'll be able to use all or part of a rejected manuscript in your subsequent work. It may take a decade or two, but almost anything you do that's well done will eventually be of value to you.

Even if *no* publisher ever prints what you've slaved over, your time has still been profitable. The more you do anything, the better you get at it. This is certainly true of writing; the more you do, the easier and quicker it will become and the sooner you'll be getting things into print.

When you're ready to print your final draft, you have to do so in a form that will be acceptable to your editor. Currently, that means you have it typed clearly using a new ribbon and quality paper.

If you use continuous fan paper, purchase micro-perforated paper that will have clean edges after you remove the tractor-feed edge. Carefully separate the pages and get them into the right order.

Photos should be labeled and captions given to each one. Captions can be placed directly onto the photos by typing the caption onto a 3M "Post-It" 3x5-inch memo pad. Each sheet will stick to its photo but can be easily removed when it comes time for the printer to work with it. It's wise to place a code letter on the back of the photo and key it into the Post-It sheet. If you have a large manuscript, note the manuscript

page number for each photo, so the editor won't have trouble figuring where to place it.

The final manuscript should be sandwiched between slabs of cardboard to keep it from becoming dogeared on its journey through the mail. If you have photos, give them extra protection from bending with sheets of cardboard and put a "Photos: Do Not Bend" on both the front and back of envelopes.

If photos could be hard to replace, it's wise to send them by insured mail; this enables you to collect a little money if you have to replace the pictures due to a postal disaster.

If you've written a book or manual, it's probably going to be necessary to put everything into a box. It's tempting to send such a large parcel by third or fourth class mail. But you'll be better off with first class or priority mail. Not only will the manuscript get where it's going more quickly (days rather than weeks), the package will be handled more gently. Your manuscript and photos are less apt to be damaged if sent via first-class delivery.

Express mail is necessary if you're really pushing a deadline. But express mail often isn't much faster than first class and *will* eat into the profits you'll earn. Don't be tempted to try to impress an editor with express mail, either. The person you'll impress is a secretary.

Since there's invariably a worry that a manuscript is lost in the mail, at least consider purchasing one of the small cards offered by the post office that will be returned by the receiver of your manuscript when it's delivered. These cards aren't expensive and will let you know when the manuscript arrived at your editor's

office. (If you want to save a bit, you can include a return card for the editor to mail when receiving your manuscript. But, unfortunately, many editors don't do this, so it isn't sure-fire.)

When you get to know an editor or publisher, you can simply call his office to check whether they've received your manuscript. This gives you an excuse to call and — as you get to know the publisher — may allow you to test a new article or book idea on him. But don't try this until you've got several works into print; otherwise you'll be perceived as "that eager beaver."

Finally, include a return envelope or postage for returning the manuscript *unless* you're sure your project has been accepted for publication. Publishers get swamped with manuscripts these days; if you don't include return postage, you'll often hear *nothing* from the publisher, forcing you to go to extra trouble getting in touch with a secretary to ascertain what's going on and wasting everyone's time. This won't get you into their good graces or impress them with your professional style. Put the extra postage or a post-paid return envelope into your package.

If you've written a book under contract (so you know it'll go into print), you may wish to include a small "blurb" for your publisher's catalog or advertising. Make it clear that the blurb is being sent on the off chance that it will be of help (so the publisher won't think you're insisting it be used). Often the publisher will appreciate this little extra since it makes it easier for them.

To find what to write about your book in an ad blurb, look at other write-ups for the company's *successful* titles (i.e., those that have been in its catalog a long time and which get lots of advertising space). Use a

blurb for a subject similar to yours and then plug in the specifics for your book. Here's a short catalog ad for one of my gun manuals to give you an idea of what you might do with an information book aimed at a wide range of readers:

THE AR-7 SUPER SYSTEMS
by Duncan Long

The lightweight AR-7 has long been a favorite of survivalists, pilots, and explorers. Now firearms expert Duncan Long reveals his secrets about the AR-7 and its sister pistol, the Explorer II, and shows you how to modify either gun to suit YOUR needs.

This book gives you the straight, no-holds-barred assessment of the capabilities of the AR-7 and takes a look at custom and spin-off versions of the firearm as well. Long shows how to improve the AR-7, how to upgrade its reliability, and how to use one as the basis of a one-of-a-kind exotic weapon. Included in the book are the secrets of buying one of these guns used, an outline of custom and do-it-yourself modifications of the firearms, and a detailed list and assessment of accessories available for these guns.

Invaluable to the owner or would-be buyer of an AR-7 or Explorer II, this book goes well beyond the owner's manual to show not only how to field strip these guns, but how to detail strip, reassemble, and troubleshoot them — with a minimum of fuss. And you'll find a detailed history of ArmaLite and the development of the AR-7 here as well.

Whether you're looking for a weapon to get you out of a tight spot, are an explorer looking for a rugged survival gun, or are just interested in creating an inexpensive recreational firearm, this is a book that belongs on your bookshelf.

(5½ x 8½, softcover, illustrated, photos, etc., etc.,...)

Don't be afraid of tooting your own horn in an ad. You don't want to get carried away, of course. But if you've made a name for yourself, or your books are sold around the world, take advantage of that and let

readers who don't recognize your name discover who you are.

Note that the blurb tries to capture as large a share of the market as is possible. Instead of telling the reader that anyone who's interested in this single type of gun will like the book, I tried to pull in a wider group, many of whom might not even own the gun, with the phrase: "survivalists, pilots, and explorers."

Also, you need to establish that the reader ("*You*" in this case) will be interested in *this* book. Notice how the word "you" is employed regularly and the last paragraph outlines all the reasons "you" should buy the book.

To give yourself a bit more credibility with readers *and* to secure secondary sales of other of your books, include a small "about the author" page and a list of your other publications when you send in your manuscript. (You can see the "about the author" material and the titles list I sent with this manuscript in the front of this book.)

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Branching Out

I have a friend who was a career military officer. After he retired, he didn't rest on his laurels. He started a gunsmith/locksmith operation that he runs from his garage. He also started a construction company with several crews of men (and he drives back and forth across town to supervise them during the day).

He uses a phone answering machine and makes appointments with people wanting to purchase firearms, obtain help with locks, or have home improvements contracted. Recently my friend purchased a micro computer, took courses in accounting, and started a modest investment firm. This last project has been so lucrative that he's selling his construction

company so he can devote most of his time to helping people invest their money wisely.

Instead of sitting back and living off his retirement funds, this entrepreneur has amassed a fortune. And you can do the same as an information writer.

You can go in one of several directions. One is to diversify; write in three or four unrelated areas. Many lines of research and industry will go through times of slump. Diversifying keeps you from "having all your (writing) eggs in one basket." If a magazine fails or the public loses interest in a subject, it won't leave you high and dry at the bank.

Another way of diversifying is to hold a job and augment your earning from it with information writing projects. This is done by people in various industries. In addition to putting a little extra cash into your pocket, it's a commendable method of placing your (and your company's) name in the public's eye through an avenue other than advertising. When you retire from your job, you'll have a skill that can be turned into a hobby or even continue to earn you generous amounts of money.

If you're a full-time writer, there are means to augment your income as well. One is to become a consultant. Many authors have found they can earn cash as consultants in the field they've covered in their publications. This makes sense. Often authors have become experts on the subject of their articles by the time they've thoroughly researched it.

A little judgment must be exercised, of course. If you don't feel you're capable of acting as a consultant, you shouldn't take any such jobs. This is especially true if the field is dangerous or where lawsuits could be brought against you because of your poor judgments or suggestions. Then it's wise *not* to operate as a consultant.

If you opt to take on consulting work, how do you break into the market? One system for doing this is to make a business arrangement with your publisher to split your consulting fees if the publisher sends the jobs your way. This is easy to do. The publisher just places a direct response coupon in the back of each of your books.

The coupon ought to have space for name, address, etc., along with the publisher's address. The page is a "mini ad" explaining to the reader the service you have available, the benefits to be derived from hiring you as consultant, and how to contact you (via the publisher).

Those readers interested in the service send in the coupons to the publisher, who sorts them, possibly by phone contact. (In order to be sure the reader is serious, it's wise to have a "cover charge" requiring a token amount of cash to be sent. This will separate the curious from the serious.)

When qualified prospects send in the coupon, the publisher then passes the person to you. You then handle the contract with your publisher and give him a cut of the deal. (Or, if the publisher diplomatically expresses doubts as to whether or not you'll split the income, you can let him handle that end of things. You'll be able to tell whether or not they're being fair since you'll be doing the consulting.)

Most consulting work will be done over the phone or through correspondence. Direct face-to-face or "on site" jobs will merit much higher fees. Be sure this is fully outlined and, if possible, have all fees (or at least half of them) paid *before* the consultation is done.

Of course, you don't have to be dependent on your publisher to get consulting jobs. You can also advertise in magazines (those same ones you've used to locate manufactures and publishers!). Place a small ad in the magazine along with a list of your qualifications, including your major publications in the field.

Other similar employment an author can engage in includes conducting seminars or workshops. A number of companies will be interested in hiring an "expert" to bring their employees up to speed. Likewise, schools often have lyceums where an "expert" lectures (usually with audio visual equipment or sample products to keep everyone's attention).

Writer's Digest offers writing seminars. By contacting the magazine, you might be able to be hired for one of these. Many colleges and universities will also conduct writing workshops or invite guest lecturers to speak to students.

To land any of these jobs, you need to do research to locate potential jobs, then send a cover letter to various companies, schools, or organizations along with a list of your qualifications. (This process is nearly identical to acquiring a writing contract for a book proposal. Be sure to include a SASE; this will improve your response rate.)

You could even land a job at a university as a teacher. This is pretty iffy, however; there are more people capable of talking about writing than there are authors. Too, many college professors are jealous of those who actually make a living at writing rather than only getting published in non-paying journals. It's sad to say that this jealousy will often blackball your chances of securing a teaching position.

Although the money is inferior, you may discover that you can appear on TV or radio talk programs if you're very successful at writing *or* have a book of special interest to the public. These appearances will often not even pay your traveling expenses. However, if you're writing for a large publisher, you may be able to finagle travel credit from an editor, since you'll be helping book sales. If you want to see the world, this is one way to do it. A few authors even manage to become celebrities in their own right. Just be sure making such appearances is worthwhile to you; they eat up time.

A few information writers discover they have a flair for producing fiction. If you have this desire, you've got most of the "hardware" and talents you'll need for writing fiction. *Writer's Digest* is again a source of how-to information about writing fiction.

Fiction is not quite the same as non-fiction. Fictional accounts need more detail and must create believable characters. The research isn't as hard and you can get away with bending things to suit your needs; but fiction isn't easy by any stretch of the imagination.

On the other hand, you'll already have the researching skills for obtaining the sharp details of specific subjects and areas of the world. This can be a big ad-

vantage because details are of major interest to readers of fiction.

You can even couple your information research with your fiction writing. For example, if you've been researching and writing about the tuna industry, you could create a character who's a tuna fisherman. You could give him character flaws and a major problem (the bank's preparing to foreclose on his boat loan, say).

Unlike most fiction authors who know little of the industry they set their characters in, you could write with sharp details, naming the parts of the boat, detailing fishing methods, and elaborating on how the catch is stored and sold.

The only shortcoming to this route is that nearly all fiction is sold through an agent these days. And literary agents handle only established writers. But you'll have a slight edge by having non-fiction work in print.

Therefore, contact several agents and see if you can come to an agreement with one. (Check elsewhere in this book to see how to locate agents.)

Some non-fiction writers become editors. "Editor" is a catch phrase that covers a wide range of duties. When we think of an "editor", most of us picture the head or senior editor — the guy who decides what does and does not go into print.

In fact, there are editors and there are *editors*. If you land an editing job, you'll likely start doing line editing (also known as "copy editing" or "micro editing") for

most large publishers. Line editing is basically glorified proof reading. The line editor goes through a manuscript line by line and checks the dots and iotas to be sure everything is right. Additionally, he'll check to be sure phrases are grammatically correct (subjects agree with verbs, etc.).

One type of editing job that many information writers feel at home with is as a "fact checker" or "technical editor." This is the person who investigates manuscripts to be sure that the details and facts are correct. Information writers have the skills needed to do this and should consider augmenting their salaries with such jobs — or even doing it full-time.

Any one publisher will have a limited number of manuscripts you're qualified to do technical editing on. Therefore, you'd best operate on a freelance basis. This means you'll need to contact a number of companies who publish books you could check and offer your services. (Use the same basic techniques for locating these publishers as you would for finding a freelance writing project.)

While you may not land enough jobs to support you full-time as a technical editor, a few jobs can augment your writing income. They also give you a break from writing and allow you to see how other authors' work measures up to your own.

One excellent book for anyone interested in editing is *The Elements of Editing: A Modern Guide for Editors and Journalists* by Arthur Plotnik (available from Macmillan Publishing Company, 866 Third Ave., New York, NY 10022 for $10). This manual gives a wealth of "how-to" information about editing, and even surveys legal ramifications of editorial errors, use of a modern library system, and the various types of editing

assignments you might face. It's a must for those interested in editing anything from a newsletter to books or manuals.

A few writers go so far as to create their own publishing business (and this author actually got his start this way). As mentioned earlier, vanity presses are notorious for ripping off authors. They're *not* the way to get into print. What we're discussing here is printing a book yourself by handling the details each step of the way.

Now most authors turn pale at the thought of running a printing press, setting plates, and the like. But you don't have to do that. In fact, many publishers hire independent printers to do this for them. A writer can do the very same thing these publishers do.

What's really necessary is to write your book and then have a qualified printer take it from there. If you want to save cash, you can produce your own camera-ready copy, rather than having it typeset. This can save you up to $30 a page and will often make the difference between being able to afford to print your book and having to forget the possibility.

"Camera-ready" means just what it implies. You produce a sheet that's ready to be photographed with offset cameras and used to print a page. If you have a daisy-wheel printer and a word processor with right justification (which most of them have), you've got everything you need to do your own "composing."

Composing is simply creating lay-out pages using a computer printer or typewriter rather than a typeset-

ting machine. Often, the results rival those of typesetting and many readers will never notice the difference. Try to find a daisy wheel that looks as much like the type you'd find in a book and you're ready to go. ("Letter Gothic" is a good choice if you're in doubt.)

There are a few things you can't do when composing with a word processor. Like italics. But you can adopt a practice of making words that would normally be italicized all caps, or some such thing. The main concern is to be consistent.

To transform your camera-ready pages into a book, you don't have to know much about printing. Just find a printer who'll sit down with you and discuss what size of margins you need on your final draft and where to place the numbers on each page (this will vary according to the size of your final book). Once you know what your margins will be, you'll be able to produce each of the pages for your book or manual.

(Of course, it doesn't hurt to know something about the printing process. One trustworthy source of information is the *Pocket Pal*, produced by International Paper Company. Most printers will have a copy they'll give you or which they'll sell for a nominal cost.)

Finding a competent printer that has competitive prices isn't easy. Check your phone book and make some calls. Ask for prices *and* the names of customers you can call for references. There is a wide range of quality, service, and prices among printers. It's wise to shop around.

Occasionally, you may find an expert printer that lives some distance from you; remember that if his prices are competitive, it can be less expensive to have

him do the job and then rent a truck or have the books delivered to your doorstep via UPS. (A printer that I've discovered to have prices and quality of work that's competitive with almost any other in the entire US is Ag Press, 1531 Yuma St., Manhattan, KS 66502, (913) 456-7387. Give them a phone call if you have trouble finding a local printer to handle your work.)

One more thought about printers: it seems that they are almost always behind. (One sage once remarked that the gestation time for a baby who'll become a printer is thirteen months.) So don't set deadlines that will ruin your marketing/business plans if a book comes in a month or two past when it was supposed to be in print.

When you've ferreted out a printer and are ready to create your camera-ready copy, the task isn't too hard. Your manuscript must be completely proofed so your final, camera-ready copy won't need to have any corrections made on it. If you do find an error, redo the page rather than trying to glue a correction over it; your alignment will be better and there'll be less chance of catching dirt in the rubber cement or wax.

The final copy should be printed on heavy paper with a new ribbon so the letters are dark. Film ribbon will give better results than cloth ribbon.

Pictures don't present much of a problem if you wish to add them to your book; they will increase your expenses, but often they're nearly essential to illustrate a point. To put a picture into your book, you simply leave space for the photo. This is easily done by adjusting the margins of a page or by devoting a whole page to a photo if you have a very detailed illustration. Key the space so that it corresponds to the same key

on the back of the picture, so your printer will know exactly which photo goes where.

You may wish to use a second daisy wheel to type the captions in a slightly smaller, different style of print. If you print the captions on sticky-backed labels, they're simple for you to position below the space for each photo.

You don't want to glue the photos onto your manuscript because the printer will need to photograph the pictures separately so they'll have the proper halftones for printing. He will then put these modified photos into position before creating the final photo of the page for the offset printer.

Since a separate negative is made for photos, it's possible to have them enlarged, cropped, or reduced. If you're getting this type of work done, remember that the proportions of the photo must remain the same as its overall size changes. Check with your printer; he'll probably have a "slide rule" gadget he'll loan you to help determine proportions on your photos if you need to change their sizes to fit onto your pages.

If you're serious about producing camera-ready text, you can purchase a laser printer, scanner, and other odds and ends and make camera-ready copy that looks just like it's been typeset. But this is expensive and ideally is left until you've had a chance to see whether or not you're really interested in self-publishing.

At the opposite end of things is using a photocopying machine to produce books from your camera-

ready pages. This is possible to do and many of the newer machines give fairly good copies. But they are not quite as flawless as offset printing.

Purchasing a photo copier would be prohibitive; it's almost always cheaper to have a printer do the job for you on offset. But if you only needed a few copies, you could go to a copying and duplication shop (check the yellow pages) and get just a few copies of your books made. These shops also often will bind your books in a folder for a nominal cost.

The photo copying process isn't perfect, but you'd have a book in print. It would not be suitable for selling in book stores where buyers are used to seeing expensive covers on anything they buy. But you could sell it through a mail-order operation (more on this in a minute).

Assuming that you've gone to the trouble to produce a quality book with the offset process, it's usually better to let the printer handle making the cover for a book by typesetting it. However, it's possible to produce a camera-ready cover by carefully laying it out using "Geotype."

Geotype consists of large letters with wax backing that come on clear sets of paper. You position a letter over the page and rub over it with a spoon or pencil. The wax on the letter is transferred to stick to the surface of the paper below it. The chore is slow, but looks agreeable if you take care to center it and keep the letters even.

While you might sell a few of your volumes by going to various book stores and asking them to carry your tome, you'll be able to make *real* money only if you sell via mail-order. The easiest method of doing this is to

contact mail-order companies and convince them to add your book to their catalog.

Finding the mail-order companies to carry your book is basically the same technique outlined elsewhere in this manual: locate the magazines covering the same subject your book addresses and pinpoint the book companies advertising in those publications. (Even if companies have turned down your book idea rather than printing it themselves, they may be interested in adding *your* edition of the volume to their catalog. The reason for this is that they won't have to go to the expense of producing and printing it. The difference to them is between gambling thousands of dollars to print your book or risking only a few dollars to advertise it in their catalog. Most publishers don't mind taking on the diminutive risk.)

If you want to earn the maximum potential from your self-published book, you'll advertise it yourself. Writing the ads isn't too hard if you use another mail-order company's ad as a model and adapt it to your tome.

The cheapest and most cost-effective ad is the classified ad. It doesn't pull a lot of orders but it pulls more per dollar spent than a display ad will. So try a classified ad in a magazine first. If the classified ad pulls well, consider a display ad in the magazine. If it pulls poorly, don't be tempted to go with a more expensive display ad, since you'll be throwing your money away.

If a display ad looks like it would have merit, it's a good idea to create your own copy and take your own

photos. If possible, make a rough drawing of the layout and positioning of the elements in your ad. You can then take these to the company doing your printing and have them typeset and lay out your finished ad. Once they're done, have the printer make a number of "velox" copies of the "ad" which you can then send to the magazines in which you wish to advertise.

Ads should be keyed so you can see how well they're doing. The "key" is a letter or number added in your address (the old standby is "Department" so-and-so). Each magazine ad should have its own key and have a letter or digit to show what month the ad appeared in the magazine. You can then tell in which magazines and months your ads are doing well and place future ads accordingly. Have your printer "splice" these keys into each velox he produces for you. He can do it for a nominal fee and the type will match.

In general, mail-order ads will probably pull worst in December, July, June, and August. But it's wise to check. Also, remember that the cover date on a magazine may be a month or more ahead of when the magazines actually are distributed.

Books are best mailed via the "Special 4th Class Book Rate" offered by the post office. The catch is it is extremely slow and packages shipped via fourth class mail arrive at their destination looking like they spent time in a chimpanzee's cage. So use tough shipping containers and allow time for the book to get there. Add a "Return Postage Guaranteed" to the package. This will cost you a bit, but it's generally less than your book is worth. And it also enables you to discover which books didn't reach their destination due to a customer having given you a wrong address or other error.

You'd be wise to brush up on mail-order rules. Post offices will have a booklet of facts you need to know. Current mail-order law requires you send your book to a customer within 30 days of receiving his order or notify him that the order will be late *and* offer a refund of his money if he doesn't wish to wait around.

The main consideration in staying in business is to send books *after* checks sent to pay for them have had time to clear the bank (cash or money orders are no problem). Don't fool with CODs; people often order via COD and then refuse to accept the package because they've changed their minds or forgotten they ordered. And the Post Office's paper work for a COD package is an abomination.

Self-publishing is a struggle and you'll have to spend much of your time with bookkeeping and advertising. But some writers enjoy this change of pace and discover they can handle their own books just as well as any publisher. (And often better. An author/publisher will have a vested interest in publicizing his works.)

The main consideration with self-publishing is that there is no guarantee that your book will sell well. Therefore, never spend more cash on printing and advertising your book than you're willing to lose. Self-publishing is a gamble. Don't lose your shirt in the game.

Whether you're into writing in a number of fields, peddling novels on the side, acting as a consultant, or self-publishing, diversification will often enable you to earn more money. This income can enable you to make

a steady income as an author and often makes the difference between continuing as a writer or acquiring an "honest job."

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Now Do It

Having read this book, you now have the information you need to start on the road to becoming an information writer. But *wanting* is not the same as *being*. You have to work to realize your dream.

Information writing doesn't have the glamor of fiction writing. But once you become good at it, you aren't apt to starve to death waiting for that "lucky break" that never comes. Rather than compete for the crumbs that large publishers dole out, you can make a generous living as an information writer.

Now you've got to get to the "hard labor" of researching your market, getting an office set up (or straightened out), and locating the tools you'll be needing. Then you'll have to write, write, write until you've

honed your skills and got the attention of several publishers. That part is up to you, no one is going to do your writing for you.

So get started!